

BOBBY ADAIR  
CRAIG DILOUIE  
GLYNN JAMES  
STEPHEN KNIGHT  
JOE MCKINNEY  
T.W. PIPERBROOK  
L.T. RYAN  
J. THORN

# THIS IS THE END

THE POST APOCALYPTIC BOX SET  
(7 BOOK COLLECTION)

Slow Burn: Zero Day, Book 1

BOBBY ADAIR

The Retreat #1: Pandemic

CRAIG DILOUIE  
STEPHEN KNIGHT  
JOE MCKINNEY

Diary of the Displaced - Book 1  
(The Journal of James Haldon)

GLYNN JAMES

Earthfall

STEPHEN KNIGHT

Contamination Prequel  
(Post-Apocalyptic Zorrone Series)

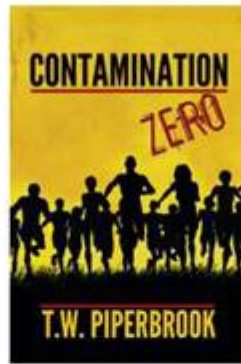
T.W. PIPERBROOK

Affliction Z: Patient Zero  
(Post-Apocalyptic Thriller)

L.T. RYAN

Revelation: The Inevitable Horror  
(The World Arcane Series - Book 1)

J. THORN





## **This is the End: The Post-Apocalyptic Box Set (7 Book Collection) by Thorn Publishing**

### **Collection Titles with Summaries**

#### [Slow Burn: Zero Day, Book 1 by Bobby Adair](#)

A new flu strain has been spreading across Africa, Europe, and Asia. Disturbing news footage is flooding the cable news channels. People are worried. People are frightened. But Zed Zane is oblivious.

Zed needs to borrow rent money from his parents. He gets up Sunday morning, drinks enough tequila to stifle his pride and heads to his mom's house for a lunch of begging, again.

But something is wrong. There's blood in the foyer. His mother's corpse is on the living room floor. Zed's stepdad, Dan is wild with crazy-eyed violence and attacks Zed when he comes into the house. They struggle into the kitchen. Dan's yellow teeth tear at Zed's arm but Zed grabs a knife and stabs Dan, thirty-seven times, or so the police later say.

With infection burning in his blood, Zed is arrested for murder but the world is falling apart and he soon finds himself back on the street, fighting for his life among the infected who would kill him and the normal people, who fear him.

#### [The Retreat #1: Pandemic by Craig DiLouie with Stephen Knight and Joe McKinney](#)

The first episode in a new novella series by acclaimed horror writers Craig DiLouie, Joe McKinney, and Stephen Knight!

As a new disease turns people into sadistic, laughing killers, in Boston, a battalion of light infantry struggles to maintain order. As the numbers of infected grow, the battalion loses control, and the soldiers find themselves fighting for their lives against the very people they once swore an oath to protect.

During the ensuing collapse, the lost battalion learns the Army is still holding out in Florida, which has been cleared of the Infected. Harry Lee, its commander, decides the only hope for his men is to get there. But first they must cross more than a thousand miles of America that has been turned into a war zone, fighting a fearless, implacable and merciless enemy.

#### [Diary of the Displaced - Book 1 - The Journal of James Halldon by Glynn James](#)

James Halldon wakes up in a strange and dark place, surrounded by endless junk and debris. He has no idea where he is, or how he got there.

No food.

No water.

No light.

Almost no memories of his past.  
And there are things moving in the darkness around him. Things that growl.  
And daytime never seems to come...

[Earthfall by Stephen Knight](#)

WHEN OUR WORLD ENDED, THEIR MISSION BEGAN

The Sixty Minute War brought humanity to the brink of annihilation. Billions perished. The planet Earth was turned into a virtual graveyard, with the shattered, burned-out skeletons of great cities serving as tombstones marking Mankind's demise.

But in the United States, one final outpost remains. Ten years have passed, and Harmony Base, a subterranean U.S. Army installation that survived the nuclear inferno, has yet to receive any response to its continual radio transmissions. Long-range surface reconnaissance missions fail to locate any other survivors. Harmony's personnel, a mix of military and civilian specialists, wonder if they are the only living beings left on the planet.

Earthquake damage to the base's vital power plant necessitates a different type of mission: the retrieval of spare parts from a storage depot in San Jose, 1,600 miles distant. Captain Mike Andrews and his crew set out across a Giger-inspired landscape blighted by lightning storms and deadly hazards that could swallow their all-terrain vehicles whole. The last thing Andrews expects to encounter in the nuked ruins of San Jose are survivors led by a twisted freak with mental powers off the scale...

Harmony is America's last chance to rise up from the ashes of the nuclear holocaust and help restore civilization. But only if Andrews and his crew can escape San Jose...and the madman who calls himself The Law.

[Contamination Prequel \(Post-Apocalyptic Zombie Series\) by T.W. Piperbrook](#)

The infection starts with Frank, one of the locals at the town bar. In just a few hours, it has consumed the entire town.

Dan Lowery, one of only four police officers in St. Matthews, soon realizes he is no match for the impending destruction. Violence and bloodshed litter the streets, and the infected roam freely. No one is safe here--not even his family.

Somewhere, someone knows what is happening, and about the horrors to come...but is it too late?

[Affliction Z: Patient Zero \(Post Apocalyptic Thriller\) by L.T. Ryan](#)

Something dark lurks in the wilds of Southern Nigeria. An experiment has gone horribly wrong and threatens to wipe all traces of humanity from Earth. 3rd Ranger Battalion, Bravo Company is sent in to assist, clean up the mess before it gets out of control.

They've vanished.

Sean Ryder is an Air Force Pararescueman. Attached to SEAL Team 8, he believes he is on a routine rescue and recovery mission. Less than half an hour after landing in Nigeria, he knows that is not the case. And the further his mission leads him, the harder it becomes to get out alive.

Patient Zero is the first book in the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic series Affliction Z.

[Reversion: The Inevitable Horror \(The Portal Arcane Series - Book I\) by J. Thorn](#)

With a noose around his neck, Samuel arrives in a forest littered with caution tape and artifacts of the deceased. He struggles to regain his memory while fending off a pack of wolves and the mysterious visitors who seem to know more about this dying world than he does. Major, Kole and Mara, new companions also trapped in this strange place, realize they must outrun the ominous cloud eating away at their world before it collapses upon itself. Samuel must find a way to escape the reversion.

[Get another massive collection for only \\$0.99! Click here...](#)



# SLOW BURN ZERO DAY

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## Foreword

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First off, let me apologize to University of Texas alumni and current students. Much of this first book in the series takes place on the UT Austin campus, and I took some liberties with the campus layout. In many ways the fictional version of the campus in the book is similar to the campus as it was when I attended UT, so many years ago.

And for those who aren't familiar with UT, this book takes place in Austin, Texas just as *Flying Soup* did. As a child, I lived all over the US. I live in Denver now, but for most of my adult life, I lived in Austin. Austin is a great city that is easy to take for granted when you live there but hard to get over when you're somewhere else. When I write, my stories feel comfortable in Austin.

*Slow Burn: Zero Day* is the first in what is going to be a series of around a half-dozen books. At least I envision a story that might go on for that length, although things could change. The stories I write evolve along their own path as I write them, and they seldom turn out anything like I imagined when I started.

That's all that I'll bore you with for now. I hope you enjoy the book.

Bobby

# Chapter 1

---

That day arrived like every other day in my life...

I came into it ill-informed and unprepared.

There had been exaggerated news reports over the past few weeks about the upcoming flu season's annual pandemic. The whiners on the talking-head channels were making noise about racial cleansing that had spread out of Somalia and into Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan. There was widespread civil disorder in China and the military was cracking down hard. Soldiers were marching. Tanks were rolling. Reporters were being arrested and internet communication had been disconnected, to whatever degree that can be done. There was rioting in some Mediterranean cities and the Mideast had oscillated into a more violent phase of its perpetual cycle.

The world was falling apart...

...in all the usual ways.

So I'd shrugged it off and spent my Saturday watching pre-season football with my buddies. I got a little too drunk, slept a little too late, and on that Sunday morning, my head hurt a little too much. It didn't help that I was going to see my mom and Dan for a needling, nagging, degrading lunch that would end with my asking for a five-hundred dollar loan to cover rent, again, and I'd get another long speech about doing something with my life, showing a little enthusiasm, or developing some kind of work ethic.

How else could that morning have started, other than with a few shots from a now-empty tequila bottle on my kitchen counter?

And perhaps I should have not just noticed, but really paid attention to the weirdness in the streets on the drive over. But when one gets up in the morning and explicitly decides to paint oneself into oblivion behind a screen of booze, dark sunglasses, and heavy metal music, an unconcerned world just slides past, beyond an apathetic fog. Which is the whole point.

All of that worked just as planned until I walked into Mom's house and slipped in some blood on the floor in the foyer. I was dumbstruck at the scene in the living room: some semi-mutilated guy, sitting deathly still in a chair by the fireplace, my mother, on the living room floor in a pool of blood, and Dan, on his knees with his back to me, hunched over her with busy elbows and noisy hands.

Time ticked languidly past. Unsavory images bombarded my optic nerve, only to be rejected by my unreceptive brain.

Unencumbered by the state of horrified surprise that afflicted me, Dan stood up and looked at me with his thin gray comb-over dangling in front of his pale round face. His blood-smeared lips smacked and his crazy dark eyes fixated on me.

I yanked my phone from my pocket and threatened, "Dan, I'm going to call the police." As if I wasn't going to do that anyway.

He came at me, clearly not afraid of the police.

My feet somehow found traction on the slippery floor and I bounded into the kitchen. Dan gave chase with his big, blue-collar hands grasping at my shirttail.

With surprising speed, he caught me near the dishwasher. A big ape hand squeezed into my arm and spun me around. The other reached for my throat, with toothy jaws following close behind. I tried to protect myself by throwing up my left arm.

I reached over and pulled a large carving knife from the block on the counter, and I stabbed Dan, tentatively at first, but as his teeth tore my skin I stabbed again and again, with increasingly brutal enthusiasm.

When it was over, I sat on the floor with my back to a cabinet door in a large, copper-smelling puddle of Dan's blood, with his sweaty body pinned across my legs.

He was dead.

I was fixated on the horrid bite wound on my left forearm. For a long time I watched, hypnotized, as the blood oozed and dripped.

Sometimes, a half-bottle of breakfast tequila just isn't enough to deal with the day's reality.

I dropped the knife and proceeded to roll the flabby corpse onto the tile.

I walked through the mess in the kitchen and found my cell phone on the floor in the foyer. Thankfully, it hadn't broken in the scuffle. I dialed 911.

Busy.

*Shit!*

I tried again.

Busy.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

I walked out the front door and onto the wide porch. The upper middle-class cracker neighborhood ignored me, focused instead on its own pockets of human chaos. Four houses down, across the street, some sort of scuffle had spilled out of the front door and people were struggling on the lawn. A car raced up the street at a very unsafe speed. Some residents loitered aimlessly.

I dialed 911 again. Still busy.

What the hell?

I went back into the house, closing and locking the front door behind me. Things weren't making sense.

I went into the living room and looked down at my mother's torn body and shook my head. It was surreal.

I guess some people in that situation would have crumbled, some would have cried, but I'd emotionally disconnected from life a long time ago. For that, I had to thank the skeletal bitch on the floor, with her greedy rodent soul and her short-tempered ape-mate in the kitchen. If anything, her death was a belated answer to old prayers, with a bit of an unexpected mess.



I thought about an inheritance and an end to my financial troubles. I thought about the infection from Dan's stale breath and yellow teeth beginning to fester under my skin. I thought about the eventual scar and the great bar room story it would make. Pain today, pussy tomorrow. Half a smile bent my lips.

The guy in the chair was in bad shape. Not living, of course, but in bad shape even for a corpse. His right arm was missing whole bite-sized chunks of flesh, *human* bite-sized chunks. His head was beaten beyond recognition. On the floor beside the chair lay a bloody fireplace poker, quite likely the weapon that had given his skull its new shape.

I felt sick to my stomach. I felt an uncharacteristic chill.

I looked down at the wound on my arm. Coagulation hadn't yet begun to staunch the flow of blood. I needed to do something about that.

I dialed 911 again. Nothing.

Crap.

I went to Mom and Dan's bedroom and into the master bath, opening the medicine cabinet.

I found an off-brand bottle of antibacterial liquid.

My head started to pound. The morning's tequila had outlived its usefulness.

Looking around for something with which to scrub, I found myself staring at the toothbrush holder. Mom and Dan weren't going to need those anymore. I lay my forearm over the sink, poured the antibacterial into the gaping tears, and clenched my teeth.

Holy crap, it hurt.

Next, I went after the wound with a toothbrush.

More pain.

More antibacterial.

Rinse. Soap. Scrub. *Pain, pain, pain.*

Rinse. Antibacterial.

Clench the teeth.

Don't scream like a pussy.

Antibacterial.

Breathe.

My head was about to explode.

Letting my wound air-dry, I found a bottle of aspirin, threw four into my mouth and slurped some water from the sink to wash them down. I found a tube of antibacterial cream and squirted it liberally into the wounds as blood slowly mixed with it, trying to wash it back out. A box of Band-Aids would have to fulfill the next requirement, as no gauze or tape was in the cabinet.

I felt another chill. A fever was coming. Not good.

I used half the box of Band-Aids to pull the edges of my torn skin together. Blood oozed through. I found what appeared to be a clean washrag under the sink and used an Ace bandage to wrap it over my forearm.

I stood up straight to leave the bathroom and dizziness hit me so hard that I lost my balance and fell against the wall.

Christ!

Blood loss. It had to be the blood loss.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and tried 911 again. Still busy.

Suspecting then that the phone had been damaged in the scuffle with Dan, I made my way to the landline phone that sat on the nightstand by the bed.

I picked it up and dialed 911. Busy.

Dammit!

Dammit! Dammit! Dammit!

The dizziness returned and I fell into a sitting position on the bed.

The television's remote control beckoned me from the nightstand. I grabbed it, leaned back on the headboard, and turned the television on. A few minutes of satisfying my addiction to mindless blabber would pass the time while I waited for the phones to free up. The news was on.

Eh.

Changing the channel suddenly seemed like an onerous chore, so I dropped the remote and let the TV's colorful opiate wash over me.

A worried newscaster was talking over a video of some shopping center in France. He described the scene as a riot, but the video showed something much more violent.

People were running and screaming. Police were trying to restore order, but intermingled in the crowd were what appeared to be normal people, dressed in their Sunday afternoon casual clothes, going completely nuts.

*"What the hell?"*

The pounding in my head worsened. The chills carried with them a case of shivers. A high-grade fever was on the way. The four aspirin were proving insufficient. I reached for the telephone again to call 911, felt the room suddenly spin, and saw the hideous design on the carpet race up to smash me in the face.

## Chapter 2

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I woke up disoriented. My head throbbed. My throat was so dry I couldn't swallow. My swollen arm hurt like hell. Numbness tingled my left hand.

Cheap motel carpet scum clung to my skin as I peeled my face away from the rug. I got up on my hands and knees. Standing and walking was out of the question, so I crawled to the bathroom sink where I pulled myself up.

Having accomplished that, I bent over at the waist and lay flat on the blue swirl faux marble counter top. I turned on the faucet. Beautiful, cool water flowed. I cupped a hand in the stream and sucked in what seemed like a gallon before I slipped back down to the floor.

Morning light spread shadows across the bathroom and onto the far wall above the garden tub. For a while, I watched a square of sunlight slowly inch down the wall as the sun went about its normal rounds.

As my dizziness waned, I pulled myself up to the sink again and gulped more water. My throat felt as if it had been sanded raw then left in the unforgiving sun to dry.

I dropped to the floor again and closed my eyes for a moment that lasted long enough for the sun's rays to slide its square of light onto the floor.

When I opened my eyes again, my thoughts had cleared somewhat and I was able to hold a thought about something other than how completely shitty I felt. I pulled myself up to stand on wobbly legs.

To my surprise, I remained upright.

I drank again from the bathroom sink and looked down at the crusty brown washrag and bandage on my left forearm. I flexed my hand a few times. The damage wasn't enough to hinder movement, but infection was sure to set in if I didn't get to a doctor and get some antibiotics.

That's when it occurred to me that it was late morning. The sunlight spilling in through the east-facing window made that clear. I realized that I had slept through the entire night on the carpet in the bedroom. I recalled the scene in the living room—Mom, Dan, and the guy with the smashed skull. I needed to call the police about that. They'd be none too thrilled with the elapsed time between the deaths and the phone call to summon them.

I thought back to Sunday's breakfast tequila, and wondered how drunk I was when I'd gotten to Mom and Dan's place. I wondered whether I'd been so drunk that I blacked out and delivered them some karma in a state of repressed psycho-rage.

*Crap.* I shook my head.

Maybe it was all just a nightmare.

Using the dresser, then the walls, then the doorjambs for support, I slowly made my way into the hall and out to the living room.

The pungent smell did its best to seep in through my pores as I forced my reluctant feet forward. The closer I got, the surer I was that my nightmare was real.

Step. Step. Step.

*Christ!*

A swarm of industriously prolific flies had come into the house through the open back door. They buzzed over the feast of Mom's stinky remains and a generation of young maggots vacationed on the corpse of the guy in the chair.

Dan's punctured body would be in the kitchen where I'd left it. I didn't need a confirmation venture in there.

I needed to call the police, and in spite of the gore on the floor and the stench in the air, I needed to get something to eat.

I weighed the two priorities and the fear of the police's authority sent me back into the master bedroom to the phone.

My cell phone lay on the floor near where I'd gone comatose the night before.

The landline on the nightstand, being so much closer to my hand, was my first choice. I lifted it to my ear.

Dial tone.

That was good.

I dialed 911.

Busy.

"Damn it!" I slammed it down. "What the hell is going on?!"

I sat down on the bed and dropped my head into my hands.

Well, no cops for the moment.

Food, then.

I managed my way back up the hall, passed the living room, and stopped at the entryway to the kitchen. The buzz of flies echoed off the tile and hard surfaces. A congealed puddle of Dan's blood covered half the floor and spread all the way under the fridge.

I was stuck. To get to the fridge, I'd have to wade through the nastiness of Dan's spilled fluids.

"Jesus, it just keeps getting worse."

Tracking Dan's sticky blood all over the house didn't sit well with me, so I found the cabinet with the kitchen towels, grabbed a stack, and laid them out in front of me like stepping stones in the blood.

What seemed like a good plan prior to the first step, turned to shit when a towel slipped in the slime. My feet went out from under me and I fell. My head hit the tile and exploded in a flash of pain and bright lights. I sent a string of curse words echoing through the house.

As disgusting as it was, I lay on the floor for several long minutes while the pain, in what seemed like every part of me, took its time to dissipate.

At least nothing seemed to be broken. Feeling the disgusting brownish red goo all over my back, I rolled over onto my hands and knees and slowly stood.

Bracing myself on the counters, I got to the fridge and pulled it open. For the second time in as many days, God's good fortune shone on me. An unopened thirty-two ounce sports drink sat on the shelf.

I reached in, wrestled with the cap for a moment, put it up to my mouth, and poured it into my throat.

I stopped to take a breath. I sat the bottle on the island in the middle of the kitchen. The smooth granite invited my hands to linger on its cold surface. I leaned over, pressed my face on the stone, and reveled in the coolness.

As the minutes passed, the sugar from the sports drink seeped into my bloodstream and the glucose hit me like a rush of cocaine. The contrast from bad to good was so drastic it brought tears to my eyes.

With waning dizziness, I straightened up. I gulped down more of the sports drink and gingerly walked out of the kitchen.

I stopped for a brief pause in front of a large mirror in the foyer.

"Jeez." I looked like crap, covered with blood, hair awry, an enormous makeshift bandage on my arm, and my skin so pale that I wondered how much blood I'd lost.

I went into the laundry room, stripped off my clothes, and threw them along with my gory tennis shoes into the washer. Naked, and still covered in the most disgusting goo, I walked to the guest bath and got into the shower to scrub myself clean and peel the crusty bandage off of my arm under the warm water.

After the shower, I sat naked on the bed and finished the sports drink as the sound of the washing machine in the next room vibrated. The wound on my arm oozed pus and blood. I'd need to rewrap it with whatever first aid supplies were left.

I picked up the remote and turned on the television. My thumb went on autopilot surf mode as I thought about what to do. The police, the hospital, or both?

News flickered to life on the screen.

*Click.* News.

*Click.* News.

*Click.* Still nothing but news.

"News sucks."

I settled for one of the national cable news channels and turned up the volume.

The story was the same as Sunday, more rioting in France, but Germany, Italy, and England were added to the list. A panel of experts, or rather, speculators, argued about a virulent flu of some sort. International travel had been suspended by most countries. Airline stocks were tanking and the rest of the market was following their prices south. There was video footage of overwhelmed hospitals, and bodies lying in the streets. An announcement from the White House was expected in a few hours.

The washer buzzed, so I went into the laundry room, put my things into the dryer, and started it up.

Back in the guest room, I turned down the volume on the television and tried 911 again.

This time, it rang.

## Chapter 3

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Meeting a naked psycho-creep in a house full of dead people was sure to leave a negative impression on the soon-to-be arriving police, so I retrieved my damp clothes from the dryer and dressed.

Suddenly worried about disturbing the crime scene, I chose to sit in a tiny clean spot in the wide foyer, taking care to keep my hands in my lap.

It wasn't long before the doorbell chimed twice, followed by a series of rapid beats on the door.

"It's the police. Open up," a voice commanded from outside.

"All right. Just a sec." I stood as quickly as I could, considering my blood loss.

Again, pounding on the door. "It's the police. Open up."

"All right," I croaked, then muttered, "impatient bastards."

More beating on the door. "Sir, you need to open up."

I pulled the door open a dozen inches.

Two policemen fixed me in the predatory stare of their big, black, bug-eyed glasses before glancing down to the blood-covered white marble floor. One officer's hand landed on the butt of his gun. The second officer grasped the handle of his gun.

Very loudly, one of them commanded me to step slowly back from the door. The other officer ordered me to show my hands.

"What?" was all I got out before the cop closest to me rushed forward, shouldered the door, and knocked me onto my back.

Before I could react, a cop was on me. My arm was wrenched around behind my back and I was leveraged onto my belly. A heavy knee landed on my neck, smashing my face into the floor. A handcuff caught one wrist. My other wrist was yanked back and cuffed to the first.

It all happened faster than I could come up with a snarky comment. "Hey! Hey! I'm the one who called you!"

They pretended like I hadn't spoken.

"Don't move!" one of the officers commanded, as he took his weight off of me.

I found myself staring at his shiny black shoe, situated just inches from my face.

I heard footsteps as the other officer went further into the house.

"Oh, my God!" There was revulsion in the other officer's voice.

"What?" the cop standing over me asked.

Nothing for a moment.

"Oh, my God," said the second officer again.

"What?!" the first officer demanded. Then, to me he barked, "Don't move."

I watched his feet back slowly toward the living room. "Everything all right, Bill?"

Nothing.

“Bill?”

Just footsteps, shuffling backward.

Then Bill’s voice again, deflated this time. “Oh, my God.”

The second officer’s voice came next. “That’s sick!”

Then the footsteps got louder again.

The first officer’s voice yelled, “No!”

“You sick pig!” the second guy yelled, as I saw his shiny black shoe coming at my face.



## Chapter 4

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My right eye was swollen into a bluish lump. My lips were chapped. My throat was dry. My formerly clean shirt had a fresh coat of dried blood, some of it mine, all down the front. I was handcuffed to a metal table in a police interrogation room, alone and staring at the camera in the upper corner.

With no windows and no clocks, I didn't know what time it was. I only knew I'd been in there for many, many long hours.

While I waited for my unscrupulous interrogator to return, I amused myself by tapping out a rhythm on the table, and alternately extending a middle finger from each hand at the camera above.

I leaned over and lay my face flat on the table, drawing minor comfort from the temperature of the steel. I closed my eyes, knowing that as soon as I dozed off, my interrogator would return to deprive me of sleep.

I heard the door open, but didn't respond.

The phonebook slammed down on the table next to my head. I was too exhausted to react.

I heard a voice tell someone else, "This one's still out. I don't know what sent all the crackheads on a killing spree this week, but we've got to get that shit off the street."

"Yeah," another voice agreed. "I've got mine next door. Let me know if you come up with anything."

A moment later, the chair across the table from me scooted out and I heard a heavy man sit down.

He followed with a few exaggerated sighs. He loudly sipped from his coffee. He clinked the hard paper cup on the table next to my head.

Silence passed as he decided what to do next. A sharp exhalation and a hard slap on the back of my head announced his decision.

"Hey crackhead. Wake up."

I didn't react to the slap. Pain was becoming surprisingly easy to ignore.

I lolled my head in another direction and opened my eyes to look at my angry tormentor.

"What were you on?"

"What?" I feigned ignorance. I guess I was too hardheaded to cooperate.

He slapped me again.

"I thought police didn't do this sort of thing anymore," I said.

That earned me another slap.

The detective leaned back in his chair and drew a deep breath and stared at me.

"Look, Ezekiel...Ezekiel, that's your name, right?"

I picked my head up off the table. I straightened up in the chair, out of arm's reach for the moment. "Yeah, but my friends call me Zed. Zed Zane."

"Look, Zed, maybe you got started off on the wrong foot here."

I looked down at the worn phone book on the desk and gave voice to my frustrations. "What? Is it your turn now to beat me with a phone book? Do you guys work in shifts or what? What time is it? Why can't I get a lawyer? Why do you guys keep telling me the camera doesn't work? Don't you have one of those, ah...those, ah...who are those guys they have on TV? Oh, yeah, detectives. Why don't you get one of them to look at the crime scene and confirm what I've been telling you all night? It has been all night hasn't it?"

The detective ignored my outburst for several long breaths. "Are you done?"

In response, I chose a conversational technique that hadn't failed me since junior high: I ignored him.

The big man leaned his furry forearms on the table. "You gotta understand, Zed. You come in here in wet clothes that you just washed all the evidence out of. You assault the arresting officers." He shook his head.

"Bullshit." I'd heard that accusation a thousand times at that point.

"You talk about killing your stepdad...You did kill him right? I mean you admitted that much, right? It's right here in the file."

Not any less irritated, I said, "I told you, it was self-defense. He was attacking me." I drew a deep breath. "And where the hell do people even get phone books anymore?"

The officer crossed his big fuzzy arms and said nothing for a moment.

I did the same.

"Are you through?"

"Through with what?"

"Acting like an ass?" he said.

"What? Are you kidding me? *Really?* I go to my mom's house yesterday morning. I find my stepdad going all cannibal on her in the living room. He attacks me and I stab him with a knife to defend myself. I call the cops and then Dudley Do-Right and his partner show up, don't even ask me a question, and decide instead to beat the shit out of me and drop me here. Does that about sum it up?"

No response. I went on. "Now after who knows how long I've been in here, with you guys taking turns yelling at me, calling me a liar, oh, and beating me in the head with the phone book, you wanna say I'm acting like an ass? Well forgive me for being so goddamned rude!"

"Hi, I'm Zed Zane. I'm so pleased to meet you. Would you like a cup of tea?"

He didn't react. He just stared at me.

So, we played the staring game for a good five minutes before I won and he asked, "Are you through now?"

"Whatever," I responded.

"Let's start again. I'm Detective Tom Wolsely." He extended a hand across the table to shake mine.

I looked at his hand but made no move to respond. Of course, I did have two hands cuffed to the table.

"Don't be an ass, Zed. It's polite to shake a hand when it's offered."

"Maybe you guys should have thought about that whenever the hell it was that you locked me in here. How long have I been in here, anyway?"

The hand still hung over the table, just inches above the metal loop that constrained mine. "Zed?"

"Oh, good God." I angled a wrist up and opened my palm.

He jiggled my hand roughly in the cuffs.

"Thank you, Zed."

I let go and let my hand drop to the stainless steel.

"You have to understand, Zed, this story about your stepdad turning into a cannibal... what did you really think we'd think, Zed? It all sounds a little far-fetched, don't you think? He was a deacon in the church. A member of the school board. A retired principal. Are we really supposed to believe he got all hopped up on crack and killed your mother and the neighbor?"

I nodded. "Of course I do. I thought the whole thing was pretty crazy when I got to my mom's for lunch. Look, don't you have some kind of forensics team or something? Don't you guys look at evidence before you start beating the crap out of suspects anymore? I mean, Christ!"

"We've got people at the scene," Detective Wolsely told me.

"So what's the deal then? Are we going to just sit in this room until you get tired of beating me, or are you going to look at the evidence and then apologize to me?"

"Look, Zed. Let's just put all of that aside for the moment. You keep saying you went to your mom's house yesterday morning—"

"I did."

"—and you tell us the story. But your story is so full of holes that you could drive a truck through it."

"What? What holes? How can there be any holes? It's not like you talked to the other witnesses, because you can't, because they're dead."

"Zed, calm down. I'm trying to help you here, and in return I'd like for you to help me, too."

"By being your punching bag?"

"Now, Zed, that wasn't called for."

"I don't see how any time could be called for better than this one, do you? I mean, I have been in here for hours, being beaten and called a liar, yelled at, and berated, threatened, and, oh, did I mention, getting beaten like punching bag?"

Wolsely leaned back in his chair and froze in his cross-armed pose again.

"Whatever." I sat back in my chair and drew a few deep, calming breaths.

"Zed, you say you got to your parents' house yesterday morning, and you found your mom and the dead neighbor. Then you fought with your stepdad and that he was killed in the fight."

"Yes, that's exactly what happened."

"Well, Zed, that's not possible."

"What do you mean? How could you even come to that conclusion?"

"Zed, we're not complete idiots here in the police department. For one thing, our forensic guys are pretty good at determining time of death. It's simpler than you think, especially when it's recent. They just compare the core temperature to the ambient temperature, and get a pretty quick estimate of the time of death."

"Okay, I watch TV, too. So what's the problem?"

"Your stepdad has been dead for at least two full days."

"What? *What?* That's not possible."

"See, Zed?" Wolsely said. "Holes in your story."

"Wait, wait. What day is this?"

"What day is it?" Wolsely repeated.

"Yes. I told you I went to my parents' house on Sunday afternoon. I told you I passed out...I guess from blood loss or something, but it must have been longer than I thought."

"You passed out for two solid days and never woke up."

"Why, what's today?"

"Late Tuesday night, early Wednesday morning, you pick."

"Wednesday?"

"Yes."

"Wow. I guess so," I said.

Detective Wolsely changed the subject. "Tell me about your mom, Zed."

I huffed a couple of times and looked around the room while I thought about that.

After several minutes, I said, "You know, when I was kid I used to watch this Tarzan show on TV, and there was this recurring concept in that show about an elephant graveyard. Kind of the African version of El Dorado, only with ivory instead of gold."

Detective Wolsely asked, "What does this have to do with anything?"

"You asked me a question, Detective. I'm trying to answer it."

"Fine."

"So, Detective, when the white men came to Africa, they didn't see any elephant carcasses lying about with all the free ivory they could carry, so they concocted this theory about the existence of an elephant graveyard, where all of the elephants would go to die."

"I used to think my mom was like that graveyard, only instead of elephants going there to die, happiness would."

Detective Wolsely asked, "And now that she's dead, you don't think that anymore?"

"No, that's not it at all. I think that like those white men that went to Africa, who'd erroneously deduced the existence of an elephant graveyard, I erred in my deduction that my mother was a passive graveyard for happiness."

Wolsely was getting bored.

"Did you know that hyenas eat bone?" I asked.

Detective Wolsely shook his head.

"Yeah, they'll eat pretty much anything. Even bone. They're predators. They're scavengers. They're ugly. But most of all, they're voracious. That's my mother."

"Your mother is a hyena?"

"In a way, I guess. You see, she's not the graveyard where happiness goes to die. She's a voracious scavenger, constantly searching for any waning happiness, so that she can kill it off and eat up any evidence that it ever existed. That's my mom."

Detective Wolsely looked at me like he'd just found me covered in dog poop. "What drugs are you on, Zed?"

"What?"

"What drugs are you on? Nobody loses track of two days and then just gets up all normal and calls the police."

"Normal? I never said that. I told you I feel like crap. I was running a high fever. I still am."

"So you say."

"Yes, I do say. Get a thermometer and check for yourself! Holy freakin' crap!"

"Just tell me what you were on, Zed. Tell me where you got it. There's something seriously bad out on the street and it's making people crazy. We need to catch the guy that sold it to you. Things might even go easier on you if we can prove it was the drugs that made you crazy."

"What?"

"We took a blood sample while you were passed out, Zed. We'll figure out what it was. I mean, whether it was crack or meth or whatever. But we need to figure out what it was laced with. We need to know where you got it, so we can get it off the street. There's a lot of people going crazy on this stuff, Zed."

"What about that flu in Europe or whatever it is? I saw rioting on TV."

"Zed, let's be realistic here. There is no flu that makes people crazy."

"How can you say that?" I asked.

"Ratings," Wolsely said. "Sure there's a flu but the flu makes you puke and cough. It gives you diarrhea. It doesn't make people crazy. Those were just frightened people, doing stupid things. Zed, the world is much simpler than all of you conspiracy nuts think it is. People make bad, irrational choices for the stupidest reasons every day. I

see it all the time, believe me. There is no crazy flu going around. The answers are never that complicated. Trust me."

"Whatever."

"Besides, why Austin? Why not New York, or LA, or Chicago? There are a hundred cities more likely to get an outbreak of the flu than Austin. We're not exactly a major point of entry here, are we Zed? Come on, just tell me what you were on and where you got it."

I shook my head and looked at the floor. "Jeez, Tom. Listen to me, please. I didn't take any drugs. I was drinking. I drank a lot on Saturday. I smoked some weed with my friends. I drank some tequila on Sunday morning before heading over to my mom's house. I've told you this a thousand times."

"When did you smoke the weed?"

"It was just weed!"

"When did you smoke it?"

"The night before, like I said."

"When the night before? Zed, it may have been laced with PCP, or something worse. Surely you've heard of that before. PCP makes some people lose their shit, Zed. That may have happened to you."

I shook my head again and weakly said, "No."

"Where did you get the weed, Zed?"

"I don't know. It wasn't even my weed."

"Who did you smoke it with, Zed? They may be having problems too. They might be in worse shape, Zed. They could be dead for all you know."

I gave him the names of my buddies.

## Chapter 5

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The jail was old, like a hundred years old. The section I was in had been built in the late 1800s. It was dirty. It was smelly. Every surface was sticky beneath aged layers of oral ejecta and other human secretions.

I was in a holding cell about seven feet deep and thirty feet long. One long wall was brick. The other three were comprised of iron bars with layer upon layer of flakes, painted over by more layers of flakes. Two rows of bunks, one on the top and one on the bottom, hung from the wall for a total of eight. A single commode stood at one end, covered in stains and lumpy smears.

With my photograph taken and black ink on my fingers, I was shoved into the cell that already held twenty-five other guys, laying and sitting in the bunks and on the floor. At least a few of my fellow inmates were mentally unplugged. They stared blankly at the wall. Some paced across the spots of floor where a foot would fit. One very animated guy bounced around the cell like a chimp, screaming Tourette's-like profanities and gibberish. Most looked drunk, hung-over, beaten up, or some combination thereof.

"I need to see a doctor," I told the jailer, as he slammed the door shut.

He headed back to the end of the hall as though I'd said nothing at all.

"Hey, I need to see a doctor!"

Nothing.

"Hey!" I yelled.

The jailer stopped and glared at me. "Look, bud, you can see we're having a busy day. So lighten up, would you?"

"But I need medical attention for my arm."

"After you get assigned to a cell, you can ask your guard for permission to go to the infirmary."

"What?"

"You heard me." The guard turned and ignored further protests.

The Tourette's guy shrieked at the ceiling from his perch on a top bunk. Nobody paid him any mind.

I looked around...there was no bunk space available. There was barely any floor space either, the only exception being a few feet next to a comatose giant of a black man leaning on the bars near the commode.

I stood, holding the bars of the door and looking up and down the short hall. Two long halls branched off at either end and led to rows of cells in the new section of the jail. I heard the rowdy noise of hundreds of other prisoners coming from down those halls.

Tourette's guy shrieked again. "I'm hungry!"

I leaned my face against the sticky, flaky iron bars and closed my eyes. The bite on my arm throbbed noticeably but didn't hurt. Infection was sure to set in. I worried

about that, and about what Wolsely had said about drugs in the weed my buddies and I had smoked on Saturday night.

I wanted to feel angry about the lazy incompetence of the police who'd locked me up, but all I felt was drained and frustrated.

I wondered how long I'd have to wait for my inevitable release. I flexed the fingers of my left hand again, checking for loss of movement.

The lighting in the jail was too stark, unnaturally bright. It bothered my eyes. I longed for a pair of sunglasses.

I was mere minutes into my incarceration and I was already bored.

An old tube television hung from the ceiling across the hall from the cell. There was something on about riots again, something about the new flu virus. Having grown up with Mom and Dan's addiction to the repetitive ravings of the non-stop cable news faces, I possessed a high tolerance for hysterical speculation. Football, baseball, even bowling would have been a better choice than news on the TV.

I looked down at my feet. "This place sucks."

Off to my right, I heard Tourette's boy start bouncing on his bunk.

"Man, shut up," somebody over there said.

A few more voiced agreement.

I looked over. Tourette's boy was getting more aggressive.

Then, he surprised everyone by bounding off of the top bunk and onto one of the sitting prisoners.

A frenzy of fighting exploded from the far end of the cell. There was screaming, yelling, kicking, punching, and biting, lots of biting. The wave of pandemonium pushed toward me, and I decided the safest place in the cell was in the stinky muck in the corner behind the commode. I stepped quickly over the big black guy who was just starting to get up and wormed my way into the corner.

Yelling from outside the cell told me that the guards already knew what was happening in the cell.

There were arms and legs and fists. There were guys on the ground and guys clambering into the bunks. The big black guy had his back to me and pretty much blocked all access to my end of the cell. I'm sure that defending me wasn't what he intended. He just didn't see me as a threat.

Suddenly, Tourette's boy came flying out of the melee and landed in some sort of monkey grasp around the big guy's head and shoulders. As the big guy grasped at him to pull him off, Tourette's boy caught me with the craziest eyes I'd ever seen, opened his mouth wide, and chomped down on the big guy's neck.

A canister clinked in through the bars. Smoke exploded into cell, burning my eyes.

The heavy metal door swung open and the guards, dressed in riot gear, bulled their way in.



## Chapter 6

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Thirty minutes later I was sitting on one of the lower bunks with my hands cuffed behind me, shoulder to shoulder in a long row of cuffed, bloodied, coughing prisoners.

Tourette's boy was gagged. His hands were cuffed and attached to the bars of the cell behind him. His feet were bound. He slumped forward, motionless. He had an enormous gash across his scalp. A couple of the guards had beaten him mercilessly after he'd bitten them during the fight. And just because they were covered in riot gear and pissed off, they beat several more of us into unconsciousness. Three of those were cuffed alongside Tourette's boy, slumped forward and dripping blood into small pools on the crusty floor. Two of my former cellmates were bleeding so severely that they were dragged out of the cell — to the hospital, I presumed.

Of the rest of us, I was in the best shape, at least in terms of fresh wounds. I still had a scabby bandage on my arm that oozed red.

Again, I flexed my left hand to make sure it still worked. The next link in my chain of new habits was to worry about my need to get some medical attention.

From around the corner, I heard noises of another cell erupting in violence. Not long after, a half-dozen guards in their gear clomped past us up the hallway.

The jail was exploding in craziness.

As luck would have it, the big black guy who'd been my shield during the scuffle was sitting right next to me on the bunk. Apparently more bored than I was, he looked my bloodstained clothing up and down and asked, "So, what'd you do?"

"How am I supposed to answer that?" I asked.

"Most guys like you make something up to seem all badass, you know, so they won't get no shit while they're in here."

I laughed, and so did the black guy on the other side of me.

"What do you mean, guys like me?" I asked. "Is this a white thing?"

"No. You just don't look like a thug. You look like a suburbanite or a cube farmer."

"A cube farmer?"

"Somebody who sits in a cube all day," the big guy explained.

The guy on the other side laughed and added, "Like a nerd."

"A nerd?" I asked.

The big guy looked me over and nodded.

After their laughing subsided, I asked, "So do you want the truth, or a lie?"

"Man, you pick. It doesn't matter to me. I'm just tired of staring at that damned yellow wall. I can barely see the TV from here, and besides, all they want to talk about anyway is that flu, like they know what's going on. They don't know anything."

I shrugged, "I killed my stepdad."

The big guy looked down at me again. "With all that blood all over you, I guess I'd buy that."

The guy on the other side said, "He probably got arrested while trying to steal some cherry syrup from a jellybean factory."

That got some laughs from the guys nearby.

"I wish."

"What'd you do him with?" the big guy asked.

"A knife," I answered.

"I guess that explains the mess on your clothes."

"That's not actually his blood...I don't think," I said.

The guy on my left said, "I suppose you killed somebody else, too."

"It's a long story," I told them.

The big guy asked, "How many times did you stab him?"

I looked down, ashamed for a moment though I didn't know why. "The cops said thirty-seven times."

The guy to my left said, "Man, that's bullshit."

"You must have been pissed. What'd he do?" asked the big guy.

"You wouldn't believe me," I said. "What'd you do?"

"Just fighting."

"Fighting? Like a bar fight?" I asked.

"Exactly like a bar fight," he answered.

I nodded. "By the way, my name's Zed Zane."

"Murphy Smalls," the big guy answered.

"Murphy Smalls? That's not a very appropriate name for big guy like you."

"Well, at least you didn't make a stupid joke about it," Murphy said.

The guy to my left said, "That's why we're in here, one too many small jokes. I'm Earl Walker."

"Good to meet you, Earl. Good to meet you Murphy."

Earl asked, "So, did you really stab your stepdad?"

I nodded.

Earl said, "He must have done some crazy shit for you to go stabbing him thirty-seven times."

I nodded. "Some pretty crazy shit."

"Looks like you and me might as well become good friends, because we're both going to be here a while," said Earl.

"For fighting?" I asked.

Murphy said, "He's on probation. They'll probably violate him and send him back."

"That sucks," I said.

"You got that right," Earl agreed. "All because Mr. Smalls is sensitive about his name."

"Man, you know it's not like that," Murphy said. "Don't you be starting any shit."

Earl said no more on the topic.

After a few minutes of listening to the inmates around the corner go nuts, Murphy asked, "So what'd he do? I'm curious now."

"My stepdad?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I thought about those gruesome Sunday morning images stuck in my mind. "I don't know for sure, but I'm pretty sure he killed my mother."

"Yeah?"

"I was going over to their house for lunch for Spam pie on Sunday."

"On Sunday?" Murphy asked.

"Yeah, on Sunday."

"Spam pie?" Murphy asked.

"Yeah."

"That's gross," Murphy replied.

Earl said, "Man, that was three days ago. Why are you still covered in blood? Dumbass white people don't know shit about getting away with doing criminal stuff. No wonder you're in here."

"It's not like that."

"What?" Earl asked.

"He attacked me and bit my arm." I tried to pull my left arm around front to show the guys.

Earl said, "Man, that's nasty."

"Anyway, I think I was bleeding so bad that I passed out."

"No shit?"

I nodded.

"And the cops found you like that?" Earl asked.

"When I woke up, I called them."

"And they arrested you?" Murphy asked.

"They must have thought you were black under all that blood," Earl added.

The sound of three quick gunshots blasted through the corridors, opened every eye wide, and snapped every head toward the intersecting hallway. Tourette's boy was no exception. He immediately started to squirm and grunt.

"Shit," Earl muttered.

The echo of running footsteps came up the hall to our left.

Seconds later, two officers hurried past, followed by four crazed inmates in torn, bloodied clothes.

The sound of another scuffle erupted, followed by more gunshots.

"This is not good," Murphy told anybody who was listening.

I looked from left to right.

I heard the sound of...well, it sounded like wild animals.

More gunfire.

An inmate rounded the corner and ran at full speed in front of us across the length of our cell.

Another inmate rounded the corner, shoeless, shirtless, and screaming like an enraged baboon. He leapt up on the bars of our cell as if he were the one in the cage. He reached through the bars, seemingly focused on Earl. We all pressed our backs to the wall.

He screamed again as more crazed prisoners, spattered in blood, rounded the corner and flowed freely through the hall.

Several tried to reach in and grab at us before moving past the wall behind us.

Gunfire rang with alarming frequency.

More prisoners spilled from the hall at our right. They looked relatively normal, but understandably terrified.

What followed close behind them was another bunch of the wild-eyed, screaming men.

"This is gonna get ugly," Earl said.

"I think you're a little late on that newsflash, Earl," I said.

Smoke billowed out of the halls from behind us. My eyes started to burn. We all started coughing again.

"I guess this is a prison riot," Murphy coughed out.

"In the county jail?" Earl asked, shaking his head.

Tourette's boy ripped out an earsplitting wail of victory as he freed one bloody hand from the cuffs that secured him to the bars. He spun and tore mercilessly at the hand that was cuffed to another bar.

Guys in the cell got up off of the bunks and moved away. Nobody wanted to be near the crazy guy. Only the unconscious guys, cuffed to the bars, didn't move.

Another scream of triumph ripped through the violence as Tourette's boy tore his other hand free, slinging blood across the ceiling, walls, and us.

Several of the inmates cursed.

Tourette's boy yanked the gag out of his mouth and with teeth gnashing pounced on an inmate not smart enough to have moved out of the way. His teeth found flesh before the inmate could squirm away. Blood erupted from the wound.

In a flash, Murphy was on the move and ran a dozen steps to the far end of the cell, leaned his shoulder forward and slammed Tourette's boy in the side. All three hundred pounds of Murphy smashed his body into the bars.

When Murphy pulled away, Tourette's boy lay on the floor, twitching and stunned.

Everyone in the cell was staring at Murphy and the downed psycho when the door buzzer sounded in three long, loud blasts, shifting everyone's attention to the cell door as it sprang open.

We were all frozen in disbelief and indecision. Run out of the cell and into the riot, make a break for freedom, or stay put?

With mayhem raging through the jailhouse, safety was my first thought.

Pounding feet and animal sounds rang up and down the halls, mixing with jubilant cries and fearful screams. Tourette's boy squirmed and pushed himself up from the floor. He shook his head and made a loud, angry noise.

Earl yelled, "Let's go, Murphy!"

Everyone piled through the door, out of the cell, and into the melee.

"I'm with you guys," I declared, and followed Earl.

Murphy fell in behind us.

We made the left turn down the smoke-filled hall we'd all come in through.

Bodies lay everywhere, both sheriff's deputies and prisoners alike. Men ran both in front and behind us. The crazy-eyed screamers were among us, attacking anybody, tearing at flesh with their hands and teeth.

"Move!" Murphy yelled from behind.

Earl picked up the pace and ran blindly into the thickening teargas.

We coughed, struggled, and fought our way toward where we remembered the exit to be. Each barred door we encountered was unlocked and swung open. The rioting prisoners had seen to that.

We stepped on and over men until we burst into the entrance lobby, where we saw daylight through the glass door and three windows of equal size, all shattered.

Gunfire popped in the street outside and in the halls and cells behind us. To run into the street was to risk being gunned down. To go back seemed like certain death by fire, or mauling in the teeth and tearing hands of the screamers.

Earl hesitated and glanced back at Murphy for a decision. I looked back as well. It was so far beyond any situation I'd ever imagined. I was decidedly in follow mode no matter what course Murphy chose.

Whatever Earl saw in Murphy's silence was enough for him. He spun and bolted through the door. Murphy and I hurried behind.

We came out near the southwest corner of the detention center into thin clouds of teargas drifting in the smothering air and blistering sun.

Across the street, to the south of the detention center, a hilly park filled a city block. To our west was an old neighborhood that had been converted to condos and offices for

attorneys and bail bondsmen. Parked cars lined the streets. To the south and east, police cars blocked the roadways. Police officers and sheriff's deputies were everywhere, but the eight hundred prisoners spilling into the streets dwarfed their numbers.

We ran a short distance up the street, then Earl ducked beside a parked car and looked over the fender. The popping of gunfire came from all directions. I got to the car a second later. Murphy bumped the car behind me, using its mass to bring him to a stop.

I squatted about midway back on the car, its black-tinted glass blocking my view across the street. Immediately frustrated, I stood and leaned forward to look over Earl's shoulder, trying to spot a path away from the chaos. Something slammed into my chest and knocked the wind out of me. I fell to the sidewalk, gasping for a breath of air that wouldn't come.

Sprawled on my back, I saw stark blue sky above. Running feet stomped the concrete near my head as people hurried past. The pandemonium slowly became insignificant background noise. My only concern was the pain radiating through my chest and my inability to gulp a single, life-sustaining breath.

Then it happened. Air filled my lungs. I could breathe.

Wide-eyed, Murphy leaned over me. "That was a beanbag, you lucky dumbass! Get up."

Earl yelled, "We gotta go!"

I rolled over onto my stomach. With my wrists still cuffed behind me, it was difficult, but I managed to get to my feet.

Earl and Murphy were squatting again behind a car a little further up the street. They were making for the old neighborhood.

With my feet back on the street and air back in my lungs, I awkwardly sprinted to catch them, bullets be damned.

In the seconds it took me to catch up, Earl had squatted between the bumpers of two cars, looking for an opportune moment to cross the no man's land of the body-strewn street. I fell in behind him. Murphy squeezed in behind me.

Earl looked up and down the street.

"Now where do we go?" Murphy asked.

"If we can get there, I know a place to hide for a while," Earl said.

"Where?" Murphy asked.

"That survivalist dude that that got evicted a few years back."

"What's that?" I asked.

Murphy looked up the street through the car windows. "Some dude built a bunker under his house or something."

"Fuck it!" Earl yelled. He burst into a run across the street.

Without a thought about the danger, Murphy and I made tracks behind him.

Three steps into the street, and just ahead of me, Earl's head exploded in a fountain of blood and gore.

Time slowed to a cold, syrupy drip.

Fear froze me.

In mid-stride, I mouthed a four-letter word. I lost all sense of how to proceed.

Thankfully, Murphy was still moving, and his bulk slammed into me from behind. His momentum carried our entangled bodies across the street, where we landed roughly in a jumble of limbs and curse words, between two cars on the far side.

Murphy rolled off of me and sat up to look at Earl's corpse in the street. I struggled again to catch my breath, sucking in baked air off of the hot asphalt.

I peered under the car beside me and started in fright. A pair of eyes fixed on mine in a frozen stare. In a nanosecond, I registered the uniform of a sheriff's deputy on the man and I panicked, but he made no move, no sound.

I drew another deep breath. The deputy remained still.

He was dead.

I knew what I had to do.

I squirmed up to my knees. Murphy's attention was stuck on his dead cousin.

I peeked out along the sidewalk and saw the dead body of the officer lying on the curb, parallel to the car. A heavy cloud of smoke wafted across us, limiting visibility.

I wormed my way out until I was beside the deputy, trying my best to look wounded, dead, and unthreatening all at the same time.

I scraped my elbows on the concrete as I went. In moments, I was lying beside the deputy, feeling his front pocket for a set of keys. I located what felt like a metallic bulge. It took frighteningly long to sit up and angle my hand into his pocket but my effort was rewarded with the prize I sought.

No sooner were they in my hand than I was up and running away from the car and into a driveway obscured from the street by a hedge.

I turned and called, "Murphy!"

He sat motionless. He couldn't pull his attention away from Earl's corpse.

"Murphy!" I yelled, louder.

He turned and for a second, looked at me like I was a stranger.

In the next instant, he came back to reality and bolted across the gap between us, sliding to his knees next to me.

"We need to get out of here," I said.

We took off at a run into the neighborhood with all of its sheltering old houses, trees, bushes, and parked cars.

## Chapter 7

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Still cuffed, but with the keys grasped tightly in my hand, Murphy and I ran between two houses, squeezed through the gap between a hedge and a detached garage, and crossed another street. Police sirens wailed in all directions.

"This is gonna be ground zero of a major shitstorm in about five minutes," I panted, as we stopped behind a dumpster in an alley.

Murphy squatted down, trying to catch his breath. "We can't stay in this alley," he said. "We're better off if we get behind the houses, hop a few fences, and hide in the bushes. It'll be hard in these cuffs."

I nodded. "I pulled some keys off of that dead deputy."

"Who?" Murphy asked.

"There was a dead deputy by the cars. After Earl got hit."

"I didn't see him." Murphy had a vacant look in his eyes.

"Murphy, you don't look good. Did you get shot?"

Murphy shook his head. "No. I don't feel good."

I stood up straight and peered down the alley. Another hundred yards would get us down the alley, across the next street, and into some bushes, another block further from the detention center. "Murphy, we need to get to those bushes over there. Then we'll work on getting these cuffs off."

"Okay."

I nodded at Murphy. "You ready?"

"Yeah."

I took off at a run as fast as my legs would carry me. I heard Murphy behind me at first, then all I heard was the air rushing in and out of my throat and my heartbeat pounding in my ears.

I got to the street and bounced into the fender of a parked car to come to a stop. I looked up and down the street. I saw no police cars, so I started running again.

I made it to the bushes.

Catching my breath, I looked back for Murphy. He was only halfway down the alley and moving at a jog.

"Shit!" I willed him to run faster.

Long, torturous seconds passed. Murphy came to the end of the ally and lumbered across the sidewalk, past the cars, and into the street, making no effort at all to conceal himself or check for police.

"Please, *please* don't let there be a cop car," I prayed aloud. "Hurry, Murphy!"

Passing another line of parked cars and crossing over the sidewalk brought Murphy beside the hedge. He didn't slow but brushed past me. I turned and ran on past him into the space behind the converted houses.



I spied a space behind an old storage shed that would keep us hidden from the street and windows on the back sides of the houses.

We kicked some old metal trashcans to the side and squeezed into a gap between the shed and a tall privacy fence. I turned my back to Murphy and opened my hand. "Murphy, I'm going to hold the keys out one at a time. You tell me when I get to the one that looks like it'll open the cuffs."

"Got it," said Murphy, after a few moments of jingling and fumbling.

The key felt distinctly different than the others. I hoped it would fit.

I fumbled around for a few more minutes before the keys slipped from my hands and dropped into the dirt.

"Shit!"

I dropped to my knees, grabbed up the dirty keys, and tried again. The exercise was so much harder than it seemed like it should have been.

*Click.* I'd freed one wrist. "Thank God."

The second cuff was off and lying in the dirt just seconds later.

"Murphy, you're up. Turn around." I looked up. Murphy was leaning against the wall of the shed, eyes closed, drenched in sweat.

I stood, concerned. "Murphy, are you okay?"

Murphy shook his head. I reached up and put a palm across his forehead. He was burning with a fever.

"We need to get you something for that fever, Murphy."

The sound of a siren zoomed by on the next street over. *Too close.*

I drew a few slow, calming breaths. I needed to think.

We were out of the cell and three or four blocks away from the jail. We didn't seem to be in any immediate physical danger, but that was only a guess. With the riot and mass escape, the police might have shot anybody that looked remotely like an escaped prisoner on sight. Though we were missing our belts and shoelaces and had ink on our fingertips, we hadn't been put into the orange jumpsuits that the jail's long-term residents wore. There was hope. Our only sure safety lay far from the jail and far from the vindictive rage of the cops descending on us with every siren in the city.

Our one tiny advantage derived from the chaos of the jail riot and the hundreds of prisoners scampering for freedom in every direction.

I wasn't at a hundred percent, but I knew I could run. I wasn't so sure about Murphy... his condition was declining. Regardless, I knew we had to move.

I turned Murphy around and removed his cuffs. He rubbed his sweaty face with his big hands and squatted back against the shed.

I considered abandoning him and making my escape alone, but guilt stopped me. That moment after Earl got shot and I had frozen in the street, Murphy had pushed me onto the other side. Had he not done so, I likely would have caught a sheriff's bullet

and died beside Earl. Murphy saved my life. Whether on purpose, or simply because I was in his way, I'd probably never know, but I felt the obligation of a debt.

"Murphy, can you move? Can you walk?"

Without opening his eyes, Murphy nodded.

I thought back to how dehydrated I was after my fever broke. I needed to get some water in him.

"Listen, Murphy. If we go another block or two west, we'll hit Shoal Creek. From there, we can make our way north until we get outside of whatever perimeter the police have set up. We won't have to run. I think we can walk, but we need to get moving."

Murphy nodded. "I can do it."

"C'mon."

## Chapter 8

---

Shoal Creek was a limestone crevice that snaked through Austin on a southwesterly course. During the frequent spring thunderstorms, it channeled flash-flood waters through its banks, six blocks west of the jail, before spilling into the Colorado River in downtown Austin, ten blocks south. It varied in depth from ten to twenty feet below street level, and was lined with dense trees and shrubs. It could have provided an excellent avenue of escape. But with late afternoon temperatures over one hundred degrees, and the wind blowing over, rather than through the gulley, it was also been a bone-dry oven.

The sound of sirens floated through the streets above. Occasional but frightening gunshots pierced the traffic noise. Trudging through the oppressive heat, Murphy and I made it to the 15<sup>th</sup> Street bridge. At four lanes wide, with enormous old trees on the banks of the creek around the bridge it beckoned, providing a shady and cool place to rest.

I stepped from sun to shade. The temperature felt like it had dropped twenty degrees.

I motioned up the concrete embankment under the bridge. "It'll be cooler on the concrete that stays in the shade all day. Let's go, Murphy."

Murphy looked at the concrete slope like it was an insurmountable obstacle.

I grabbed his arm and tugged him along.

Fifteen steps up, he dropped flat onto the cool concrete and lay motionless.

He should have climbed further up the slope. He would have been better hidden from searching eyes. But it was clear that he wasn't moving.

I continued up to where the fat concrete bridge supports lay on the upper edge of the embankment. Three expressionless transients watched me.

"I'm not staying," I told them as the smell of urine and body odor hit me. I stopped. I was close enough.

I copied Murphy's pose and lay flat, trying to get as much of my burning skin in contact with the cool concrete as possible. It wasn't a cold swimming pool, but it worked. My irritating dizziness left me. The nauseous feeling in my stomach dissipated. The air I breathed seemed once again to contain oxygen. But we needed water. We needed it badly. Neither of us would make it more than another mile or two up the dry creek bed without it.

A thought occurred to me. I lolled my head around toward the transients, sitting above me in the shade. "Hey, is Pease Park close by?"

All three looked at me like I was speaking another language.

I waited.

And waited.

"Hey—" I started again.

"It's right up yonder a piece," one of them said, pointing up the creek bed.

"Like what? A half-mile? A mile?" I asked.

The speaker shook his head. "Just 'round that bend in the creek."

That perked me up. I knew there was an outdoor basketball court at the south end of the park. Right by the basketball court stood a public restroom and some water fountains. "Thanks!"

I decided to give us five or ten minutes more to cool off. Then I'd try to drag Murphy to the park.

I dozed off.

The sound of heavy trucks slamming across the expansion joints of the bridge above aroused me. A dozen screaming sirens racing over the bridge got my full attention.

Wide-eyed and disoriented, I looked around. The transients were gone. I sat up quickly and paid for my haste with enough dizziness to give me pause. I looked down the embankment. Murphy hadn't moved.

I looked up and down the creek bed. It was covered in the long shadows of early evening. I guessed it was seven or eight o'clock. I'd slept for at least two hours but luck was with us. The police hadn't found us.

I crab-walked down the concrete slope toward Murphy and shook him awake. It took more than a little shaking, but his eyes finally opened.

"I'm thirsty," his voice rasped.

"There's a park just up the creek a bit. We can get water there."

"A bit?" Murphy asked.

"A hundred yards, two hundred at most. We can hide out in the restrooms and maybe get cleaned up a bit."

Murphy nodded and with great effort pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. He shook his head to clear it. "It better be close. I've never felt this bad."

"It's the heat and dehydration," I lied.

It was the bite.

## Chapter 9

---

The deserted park was immersed in shadow when we arrived, with the sun having edged below the horizon. The sky still glowed a dull blue. The hot, stagnant air, only marginally cooler without the sun's heat, draped us in its sticky blanket.

With an arm over my shoulder, Murphy leaned heavily on me as we made our way into a public restroom. We both drank greedily from the sink faucets. After guzzling what we could, I had the presence of mind to flip the deadbolt on the door and the restroom became our refuge.

I stripped off my dirty, bloody clothes and washed them in the sink. Murphy struggled to stay on his feet, but did the same.

Afterwards, we hung our clothes over the stalls to dry, and sat on the floor in our underwear, resting against the wall.

After a while, Murphy said, "I need to go to the hospital."

I nodded. "I need to see a doctor, too, before this bite gets infected any more than it is."

Murphy nodded.

I said, "I think Brackenridge Hospital is about a mile or two up 15<sup>th</sup> Street. It's closer than Seton Hospital. It's walking distance, if you think you can make it."

"Without that damned sun beating me down, I think I can."

"It's dark out now," I offered.

In the distance we heard a series of angry human wails. We looked at one another.

Murphy said, "That sounds like that crazy fucker from the jail this morning."

I nodded.

More screams followed, drawing closer.

"There must be a dozen of them," said Murphy with worry in his eyes.

"Can you reach up and make sure that door is locked?" I asked.

Murphy reached a long arm up and checked. He jiggled the door, but the lock held it closed.

That was a relief.

The sounds of the screamers quickly drew close. In seconds, they were outside the restroom. Something heavy slammed into the locked door and startled us both.

Not wanting to make a sound, I mouthed, "Holy crap!"

Outside, someone was beating his fists on the metal door and screaming in wild frustration. Thankfully, the door held strong.

I saw worry on Murphy's face. I'm sure he saw the same on mine.

After a few minutes, the pounding stopped and the sound of the screaming moved away, then faded into the background noise of cars, sirens, and occasional gunshots.

"This whole city is going to hell tonight," Murphy observed.

"Yeah."

"Do you think that's all about the riot at the jail today?" Murphy asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"What then?"

"That crazy dude in the cell. Those crazy guys at the jail. The cops said something about PCP in the pot making everyone go nuts." I shuddered to think about it. "But my stepdad...I don't know. He was like that crazy guy in the cell. I don't know what's going on, Murphy."

Murphy fell silent.

After a while, I said, "I'm sorry about Earl."

Murphy nodded. "Yeah, me too."

In the silence that followed, I thought about Earl getting so horrifically shot right in front of me. I thought about my dead mom and Dan. I thought about the dead guy in their living room. I thought about the mayhem at the jail.

I'd never in my life seen a dead person before seeing my mom being mutilated by Dan on the living room floor. Now, just days later, I had to struggle to count the dead I'd seen.

Murphy said, "You know we're screwed."

I looked at Murphy, with a question on my face.

"They're going to round us all up, eventually. We'll get a year or more just for busting out of jail. We'll get time for rioting, and maybe even capital murder for that dead cop you saw."

My mouth hung open. I hadn't thought of any of that. Finally, I said, "But we were running for our lives. We were in as much danger as the cops."

Murphy shook his head. "A jury in Travis County might believe that about you, if you hadn't already stabbed your stepdad thirty-seven times, but look at me."

I nodded.

"No, *look* at me, Zed."

I did. "What am I looking at?"

"You're looking at a big black man who's gonna be sitting in front of a bunch of white jurors in Texas who are gonna be looking to blame somebody, a lot of somebodies, for rioting in a jail and killing some cops." Murphy shook his head and his gaze drifted down to the floor. "Damn, I get hauled off to jail for fighting and instead of a couple of nights, I'm gonna end up on death row."

I thought the big man might start to cry. It was hard to watch, really hard. I wondered what would become of us.

More silence.

Finally, I said, "Murphy, there's got to be something else going on here. There are too many people just going crazy."

Murphy shrugged.

"What do you want to do, then?" I asked.

Murphy shook his head. "I can't do anything, Zed. I can't begin to tell you how bad I feel. I've never felt this sick. I have to get to a hospital, or I think I'm going to die." Murphy's eyes fixed me in place and I knew he was dead serious.

"You don't think you'll make the hike to Brackenridge?"

Murphy shook his head.

I pondered that for a minute. "Murphy, I have an idea. If you can make it out to the road, just across the basketball court, maybe I can flag down a car to take us over to the hospital."

Murphy shook his head again, "Ain't nobody in his right mind gonna stop for us with everything going on outside. I'm sure the jailbreak is all over the news."

I disagreed, "It's okay, Murphy. This is Pease Park. Gay guys come down here all the time for...well, you know. They're always getting busted down here for getting busy in the bushes."

Murphy asked, "So?"

"So, I'll get a car to stop. They'll think I'm gay, and I'll tell them that my friend and I got mugged while we were walking in the park. Nobody is afraid of gay guys. Can you make it out to the road?"

## Chapter 10

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"This traffic is nuts," I said.

Phil, the Good Samaritan who picked us up, agreed.

"Is there a concert tonight?" I asked. The Erwin Center, where all the big bands played when they came to Austin, sat across 15<sup>th</sup> street from the hospital.

"Not that I know of," said Phil.

"Sorry you have to wait in all of this."

"No big deal," Phil told me. "With the jailbreak today, I didn't want to stay home by myself anymore, especially with all the sirens and gunfire. It's not safe. There are crazies running around all over Central Austin."

"I hear you," I agreed.

"It's just a few more blocks, anyway."

A stoplight changed to green and we inched across the intersection.

"Those look like military trucks up there," Phil observed.

I glimpsed between the cars ahead. I didn't know what to think of that.

Phil checked his rearview mirror. I glanced back at Murphy. "Are you doing okay, Murphy? We're almost there."

Murphy grunted and nodded.

"We'll make it pretty quick now," Phil reassured him. "I wonder if this all has to do with that flu coming out of Europe."

I shrugged.

"You don't think so?" Phil asked.

"I was talking with a police detective about it and he assured me that the flu business in Europe was all hype," I answered.

"What then?"

"He said something about the marijuana being laced with PCP or something."

"Forgive me for saying so, Zed, but that doesn't make any sense."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Why would the Army be at the hospital?" Phil asked.

"I don't know."

"Maybe they're preparing, just in case. I heard the mortality rate for the flu is pretty high. There's lots of footage on TV about rioting in Europe."

"I saw some of that," I said.

"I think I'm safe though," Phil told me. "I get a flu shot every year. Do you get a flu shot, Zed?"

I shook my head.



"You're young and healthy. You're probably safe anyway. As for me, I'm playing it safe and heading to Waco tonight. I think with all the craziness here, I'm going to stay with my parents for a few weeks."

"Probably a good idea," I agreed.

We passed another block and it became clear that the military had cordoned off the hospital complex and the surrounding blocks. They were diverting traffic off to side streets.

We got to the corner and a policeman waved us off to take a right turn.

"Can you drop us at the curb there, Phil?" I asked, pointing. "We'll have to walk the last block."

"There's got to be a place for me to drop you guys at the emergency room."

"We'll be stuck in traffic for another hour trying to find it, Phil. It'll be faster to walk, I think."

"Okay." Phil pulled the car over.

The cop at the corner pointed and waved vigorously. He was none too pleased with our choice to stop.

"Can you walk a block, Murphy? We're almost there."

"I'll try," he grunted.

Moments later, we were on the curb. I thanked Phil as profusely as I could before he made his escape from the chaos.

With Murphy leaning heavily on me, we waded through the crawling traffic and up to a break in the barriers manned by four soldiers and three police officers.

"We were mugged," I told them loudly, as we neared. "My friend got hurt. He needs to see a doctor."

A soldier waved us forward. "To your left, sir, into the triage area."

I looked left, past the entrance. Indeed, a large green tent stood back in a grassy area. We had no real choice on direction, the cordons guided us, and with all the uniformed men standing around with tense faces and ready weapons, I gave not a single thought to crossing a barricade and making straight for the hospital building.

The soldiers stood back with watchful eyes and made no move to assist me with Murphy, so I continued helping him myself.

As we entered the tent, I saw a soldier to the left and one to the right, weapons pointed down but with hands near the triggers. Two nurses wearing surgical masks met us, but were also in no hurry to provide assistance or even come close. They stood back five or six feet.

"What happened?" the nurse on the left asked.

"He's bleeding," I told them, pointing up at Murphy's shoulder with my free hand.

The nurse nodded and asked again, "Yes, but what happened?"

"Can he sit down? His name is Murphy. He needs medical attention."

“Yes, but what happened?”

Damn, persistent bitch! “I was...we were...jumped by some guys, and during the scuffle, one of them bit my friend.”

Everyone tensed.

The words I’d planned to say next stopped in the back of my throat.

The nurse on the right turned and called over a few orderlies, also in protective gear.

Behind and to my left, I noticed one of the soldiers nervously level his weapon at Murphy’s back.

“He’s sick,” I pleaded. “He needs to see a doctor.”

The nurse on the left said, “It’s okay. Calm down. We have a ward set up, offsite.”

“A ward?” I asked, feeling lost in my inability to understand any of what was going on around me.

“Has he been violent?” the nurse asked me.

I shook my head, “He can barely walk. He’s got a fever.”

“When did this happen?” she asked me.

“Um...earlier. A while ago. It took us a long time to get here,” I told them.

The orderlies took Murphy’s weight off of me and helped him toward a doorway on the left side of the tent.

I started to move after them and the nurse put a hand out to stop me.

“You need to stay here.”

“What?”

“You can’t go into the quarantine ward.”

“What?”

I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder and a voice said, “Sir.”

I turned to see a soldier there. I started to say something to him, but the nurse asked, “Sir, what happened to your arm?”

I looked down at my scabbed, oozing wound. “Um, I got bitten. I need to see a doctor about that too.”

“This looks days old,” the nurse said.

“It happened on Sunday.”

“On Sunday?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Was it an animal or a human?”

That seemed like a very odd question to me. “My stepdad.”

“And where is he now?” she asked.

“Um, I don’t know.”

The nurse didn't believe me. I couldn't see her face behind her surgical mask, but her lengthy pause gave it away.

"And this happened on Sunday?" she asked me again.

"Yes." I nodded.

"Come over here for a moment."

I followed her and one of the soldiers followed along behind. She sat me on a cot and shoved a thermometer into my mouth. She pulled an Otoscope from her pocket and pushed my forehead back with her hand.

"I think it might be infected. I need to get some antibiotics," I said.

"Keep your mouth shut while you have the thermometer in." She shined the light into each of my eyes, first in, then away, then in again.

I squinted at the harsh little light.

"Have you taken any drugs today?" she asked.

"No," I said, indignantly.

"Mouth shut," she told me. "Any sensitivity to light?"

I nodded.

"Fever?"

I nodded.

The thermometer beeped. She yanked it from my mouth and looked at it. Her shoulders sagged. She was disappointed.

"What?" I asked.

She looked to the soldier and nodded. The soldier turned and called for someone.

"What?" I asked again.

She turned to me. "I'm sorry, you'll need to go with your friend to the quarantine ward."

*The quarantine ward!* That didn't sound at all like a good place to be.

"I'm fine. I just need some antibiotics." I raised my voice. "What's going on?"

The soldier's rifle came up and pointed at my chest. Another soldier hurried over, as did a few orderlies.

"Calm down, please," said the nurse.

"I am calm. I just want to know what's going on."

"Please," she said, "just go along with the orderlies. You'll get all of your answers in the ward. I need to see to other patients."

"What?"

"Please," she begged.

One of the soldiers pushed the barrel of his rifle against my chest.

"Look," it was my turn to beg, "I'm not sick. I don't need to go to a ward. I'm fine. I just needed some antibiotics."

The nurse looked at me. She seemed torn between choices. Nobody moved. Finally, she said, "Stay here. I'll be right back."

She walked across the tent and approached another nurse. They began talking in hushed tones, casting glances my way. They were not in agreement, that much was clear. The conversation came to an end and my nurse came back over, with her head hanging a little lower, and her shoulders sagging a little more.

"I'm not sick," I said, as she walked up.

"You're symptomatic. You've got a low-grade fever. Your pupils are fixed and dilated."

"What does that mean?"

"They don't contract when I shine a light on them."

"Yeah, but what does that have to do with anything? I'm not sick."

"Tell me about your stepdad. Was he sick?"

"I..."

"Was he?"

"I don't know."

"But he bit you. Why?"

"I don't know. There was something wrong with him."

"What do you mean?"

I didn't like where this was going. "He attacked me."

"Were you having an argument?"

"No, he was just crazy. I—"

"I understand. What about after? What did he do after he bit you?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"Nothing? He just left you alone?"

"He's dead."

That stopped the conversation.

The nurse took a moment to recover. "What happened?"

"The police shot him." It was the first lie I could think of that seemed plausible.

"Because he was attacking you?"

I nodded.

"And this happened on Sunday?"

"What about you? What happened after?"

"I...I guess I passed out."

"You fainted?"

"I don't know. I think I lost a lot of blood. But I'm okay now."

"Your fever; have you had this ever since the bite?"

I nodded. "It was higher at first. I felt pretty crappy. Now...I didn't even know I had a fever. I thought it broke."

"Look, Mr..."

"Zane."

"...Mr. Zane. Let these men take you to the ward. I'm sure you'll be fine, but we have to follow the protocols."

"Why?"

"For everyone's safety."

"So this is that flu from Europe that I saw on TV?"

"I honestly don't know, Mr. Zane. Please, let them take you to the ward." She turned and walked away.

The orderlies grabbed me by my elbows and guided me out of the same doorway through which Murphy had gone a few minutes earlier.

Backed up outside the tent was an enclosed military truck the size of an ambulance, but with benches along the sides like a paddy wagon. Four people were seated in the truck. Murphy lay on the floor on his face, like a dead man.

A half-dozen soldiers stood by, ensuring that all of us quarantine patients made it from the tent to the truck without wandering off.

I was guided into the truck, ordered to take a seat, and told quite firmly not to get back out.

I felt angry and defeated, caught again in a net of rules backed by the force of guns, in the hands of people who prejudged me as guilty of something I wouldn't even understand until it was probably too late. A glance up at the soldiers with their murderous weapons assured me that it was already too late.

I put my head in my hands and looked down at the floor. Murphy was moving slightly with each unconscious breath. How long would he live without medical attention?

I started second-guessing my choices: calling the police from my mom's house, telling the police the truth, escaping the prison, and dragging Murphy to the hospital. They had all seemed like the right things to do at the time, but each had just led me further and further down a hole that seemed to have no bottom.

"Mr. Zane."

I looked up. The nurse who'd examined me stood a few feet away.

One of the soldiers was immediately beside her. "Ma'am, you shouldn't be out here."

"I need to give this patient some medication."

"Ma'am, our orders—"

In a very stern tone she said, "Sergeant, this is a hospital. I am a nurse. It is my job to care for these people, no matter what is going on. Now, I'm going to give this patient his medication. If you have a problem with that, I suggest you talk to your commanding officer, who can talk to my boss. But until you do that, you need to let me do my job."

That was that. The soldier backed off.

The nurse came over to me and pushed a pill bottle into my hand.

"What's this?" I asked. "Antibiotics?"

"No," she answered in a hushed tone. "The bottle is empty. My name and cell number are written on it."

"What?"

"Listen! You shouldn't be going to the ward."

"So I'm not sick."

"Yes, you are but...listen, Mr. Zane. You have the symptoms. You caught whatever this is, but you seem to be recovering."

I asked, "Are you saying that most people aren't recovering from this?"

She shook her head.

Crap!

"Mr. Zane, your blood probably has the antibodies that might help in making a vaccine, but nobody here wants to hear that. Avoid the ward if you can. Slip away if you can, but don't lose my number. Call me. I need to see what I can do about getting you hooked up with a real doctor. And for God's sake, please stay away from people if you do get away. We don't know all the ways this can spread. You might still be contagious."

"Why should I stay away from the ward?"

"Just avoid it if you can." She turned and walked away.

"The other truck is back," I heard one of the soldiers outside say. Without another moment's pause, the doors of the truck slammed shut.

I looked around at my companions in the truck. None looked well. Two sat with elbows on their knees and faces in their hands. One stared at me with wide, fearful eyes. The last had passed out and fallen over sideways on the bench. All showed signs of recent, bruising struggles. There was at least a little blood on each of them.

Not good.

## Chapter 11

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The engine started and the truck rolled across the grass. We bounced over a curb and accelerated away from the hospital.

In the dim light inside the truck I looked down at the empty brown pill bottle. “Steph G.” I memorized the number and stuffed the pill bottle into my pocket.

The link between the European flu and the insanity everywhere crystallized in my mind. Was I immune? Really? Or was it just a matter of time before I went nuts like Dan did, or like the men in the jail? I shuddered to think about it. Could there be a worse fate than losing one’s mind?

I flexed my left hand. My forearm felt stiff. I looked at the crusty scabs and surrounding puffy red flesh. I pressed a finger into the puffiness near one of the big scabs. I felt no pain but disgusting yellow pus oozed out. I felt sure I was it was only a matter of time before I lost my arm to infection.

I shook my head. My situation was dire. I was powerless to alter it. Despair washed over me, but my eyes stayed dry. If there was one thing that Dan and the dead harpy did for me, it was teaching me how to shunt away troublesome emotions before they caused me more problems.

I took a deep breath to clear my head. I needed to think. Steph said I needed to avoid the ward, and that’s what I intended to do. I needed to focus on escape.

The truck slowed. It bounced over another curb and maneuvered through some turns. It came to a stop and went into reverse, then stopped again.

The clink of metal on metal announced the opening of the doors.

Outside were more soldiers in protective gear, with guns either at the ready or pointing into the truck.

“Let’s go,” one of them ordered.

My quarantined companions who were able had made their way to the rear of the truck.

I kneeled down to wake Murphy. His skin was hot to the touch—really hot.

“We’ll get him,” a soldier told me.

I looked at him, but ignored the order. “Murphy, c’mon. Get up.”

“Out of the truck, sir!” The soldier pointed his weapon at me. Another stepped up to the open door and did the same.

I nodded and slowly stood. “You’re the boss.” I refrained from adding a vulgar aspersion.

Outside the transport truck, soldiers formed a corridor that led into a building. There would be no escape at that point.

I walked through the doors and into an old, familiar-looking building. I quickly realized that we were on the university campus, which neighbored the hospital campus. They walked us through the entrance to a very old basketball arena. The soldiers herded us

toward a pair of double doors that I knew to be one of many entrances to the main gym floor. They put us up in a tight line right at the center of the pair of doors.

One soldier spoke loudly to us, "Because of the infection, I'm going to open this door, and I need to close it as soon as possible. So, as soon as it opens, all five of you need to hurry through the door. Medical personnel in the quarantine area will take you from there and give you the medical attention that you require."

Before anyone could ask a question or protest, the soldier ordered the door opened.

I was last in line and was roughly pushed forward by several strong hands on my back. I fell into the guy in front of me and we went down like walking dominoes. I bumped the edge of the door as they pushed me past and I tripped on a pile of bodies and fell. The door slammed shut behind me, locking us in.

Wicked, angry thoughts blossomed with my anger and spilled out of my mouth in a long string of curses at the soldiers. I pushed myself up off of the guys below me and was silenced by what I saw in the gym.



## Chapter 12

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Gregory Gym was eighty years old but had been renovated nicely. The gleaming wooden floor had space for three full basketball courts. With the collapsible wooden bleachers pulled out and upper level seating, the gym had room for a few thousand fans. With the doors locked and with platoons of soldiers ringing the building, it was a makeshift asylum for several thousand infected inside. More infected were being shoved through the door at discouragingly regular intervals.

Most of those in the gym were frenetic and aimless. They were noisy. They sniffed one another as though looking for a meal. They scuffled. They screamed. Most couldn't remain still, though a good number sat catatonically or lay like corpses on the floor and benches. A few rattled on in nonsensical streams of words like crazed meth heads. More than a dozen ran around the gym, attacking and fighting with whomever they bumped.

It was a madhouse.

At one time, I guessed, hundreds of portable beds had been lined up in rows on the floor. By the time I arrived, they were in disarray. Random pieces of hospital equipment were scattered about. More than a few of those locked in the gym wore scrubs or hospital lab coats.

Very disturbing were frightening smears of blood and bits of meat in perhaps a dozen spots on the floor. More disturbing than that were the infected, who appeared to be licking at those spots or chewing on things I preferred not to look at too closely. It reminded me of Dan's meticulous attention to the harpy's carcass.

Many around the floor had bloody injuries, torn clothes, and quite often, bite marks. Many were unscathed, but all had dilated, crazy eyes. The same dilated, crazy eyes as me.

I sat on the floor next to Murphy, who lay passed out on a cot next to a wall, far from the door. He groaned and stirred. I reached out and felt his forehead. No change. He was still burning up with fever. The same fever I'd had that first night, I guessed.

Some guy with shaggy hair, a beard, and hippie sandals very suddenly came sprinting at me out of the crowd. I stood just as I noticed him, immediately on the defensive.

He made no effort to slow as he neared me, a fact I didn't realize until it was too late. He hit me at full speed and slammed me into the wall, his face stopping at kissing distance.

"They're gonna kill us all!" he screamed.

I put my hands to his chest and started pushing. "Get off me!"

He grabbed my shirt to pull himself closer.

I got the full stench of his hot, slobbery breath. His spit splattered my face.

"Get off me, motherfucker!" I pushed harder.

"Slaughter! Slaughter! Kill all the zombies!"

I knocked his hands free and pushed hard. The crazy guy fell on his back but bounced right up and ran off to accost someone else.

"Christ!" I looked around and saw a guy walking toward me in a bloodied lab coat. He seemed calm, normal even. I took a defensive stance and got ready to punch him in his glasses.

His palms went up in front of him and he said, "It's okay."

I relaxed a tad, but prepared myself for another kind of crazy.

"It's okay," he said again. "I'm like you."

"What? What do mean, like me?" I asked.

"Slow burn," he responded.

"Back off, crazy man," I told him.

"No, it's okay. I'm not like them."

"Just keep your distance," I warned.

He stopped about five feet in front of me and put his arms down. "I'm Jerome, Jerome Barnett. I work for the CDC."

I was taken aback. "The Center for Disease Control?"

Jerome nodded.

"The one in Atlanta?" I asked.

"The very same."

"Okay." I lowered my arms, then pointed out across the room, indicating the madness around us. "What the fuck?"

Jerome looked around, "Yeah. Kind of overwhelming isn't it?"

"Overwhelming? Not my first choice of words," I said.

Jerome said, "I guess your first choice was 'fuck,' wasn't it?"

I nodded. "You gotta admit, Jerome, this is pretty fucked up. Do you know what the hell is going on?"

"It's a long story."

"I've got nothing but time, unless you believe that crazy dude that was just here."

Jerome said, "I'll talk quickly."

That concerned me.

Jerome grabbed an upturned cot and pulled it over by Murphy's cot. He sat down in front of me. I found a bit of room on the corner of Murphy's cot that wasn't covered by Murphy and sat down to face him.

"This is a disease caused by a virus."

"A virus?"

"Yes," Jerome answered.

"Okay," I prompted.

"There was an outbreak about two months ago in Africa at a refugee camp in Kenya, just across the border from Somalia."

I nodded, "What kind of outbreak. This?" I gestured around.

"Yes. You probably saw something in the news about it."

I shrugged, "Bits and pieces I guess. I don't really pay much attention to the news anymore."

"I hear you," Jerome agreed. "So, I work for the CDC as an Epidemic Intelligence Services Officer."

"Say what?"

"I'm an epidemiologist."

I was impressed. Jerome didn't look much older than me. He was clearly not the slacker I was.

Jerome continued, "I work in the field for the CDC. When there's an outbreak of some disease somewhere, especially if they're having trouble identifying it, they send me."

"You're the guy who identifies it?" I asked.

"No, there are doctors who specialize in that. I'm more of a response coordinator. When we don't have a defined protocol, because we're not sure what we're dealing with, I usually get the call. Most times, it's something run-of-the-mill, H1N1, Hantavirus, things like that, that aren't getting identified correctly in the field. We rarely come across anything new, widespread, and deadly. I mean, we come across new strains and variants all the time, but nothing that meets all those criteria."

"Widespread?" I asked. "Deadly?"

"I'll get to that."

I frowned.

Jerome continued, "So we started getting reports of something weird out of Kenya six or so weeks ago. It doesn't take much to raise the CDC's interest. A few cases of unusual symptoms is usually enough to get on our radar. So when this popped up, it was a few cases the first day, then a few dozen, mostly in refugees coming across the border. We realized immediately that something was happening in Somalia. But that place is pretty lawless, and we don't go in there. Before you know it, I'm on a plane to Kenya and thirty hours later, I'm at the refugee camp. By the time I arrive, the cases are numbering in the hundreds, and it's not just Somali refugees fresh across the border anymore. Refugees in the camp are infected.

"Well, the first thing I try to do when I get there is try to quarantine the camp, but I've already missed that boat because it's spread to neighboring villages. While I'm still figuring that out, it pops up in Sudan and Ethiopia.

"People from the WHO and CDC come pouring in, but at this point, there's nothing in the media about it, because it's just Africa and nobody really gives a crap about dead Africans, but everybody in the community..."

"The community?" I ask.

“CDC, WHO, all of us guys who watch this stuff. Well, we know it’s bad because it’s literally exploding out of control and we aren’t even close to knowing anything about it.”

“So that’s where we are? We don’t even know what it is?” I asked.

“You’re jumping ahead of me, ah...ah...”

“Zed. The name is Zed.”

“Well, Zed, things get pretty out of hand pretty quickly. People in charge start freaking out. The Kenyan army comes in and things start getting ugly. All of the expats, the aid workers, the volunteers...they start bugging out. The Chinese, the Europeans, the Americans, they all go. Everybody sees what’s going down and nobody wants to stay around for it.”

“What do you mean, ugly?” I asked.

“Look around, Zed. This is only the beginning. I don’t just mean the beginning of the infection, I mean the beginning of what the infected will start doing once their biological urges get the best of them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hunger, sex, the basic urges, but I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Okay, well, hurry up, because I’m waiting for the what-fuck-is-wrong-with-me part.”

“Okay, let me talk about the disease for a minute.”

I nodded, dramatically, prompting him to move it along.

“The virus—we’re pretty sure that’s what it is—is transferred through bodily fluids.”

“Okay.”

“So, in your case, I guess looking at your arm, you were bitten. Saliva gets in the wound, you get the virus.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Intercourse, of course.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“Kissing would do it. Heck, if somebody sneezed or coughed and the droplets got in your eyes or you inhaled them, that would do it. This thing is contagious as hell.”

“Wow.”

“So I’m infected because I got bitten.”

“Yes.”

“How can you be sure? I’m not acting all whacked out like the rest of these...” I wanted to say zombies, but couldn’t bring myself to use the word.

“You’re infected, Zed. Everybody who gets bitten gets infected.”

“Everybody?”

“Everybody.”

“But you said you didn’t know that much about it.”

"Yeah, I did, but we're almost certain that biting is a 100% effective transmission pathway."

"Crap," I muttered. "Did you get bitten? Is that why you're in here?"

"Actually, I think mine was a sneeze or a cough when I was in a ward. I caught it that way."

"That sucks."

"More than you know...well actually, I guess you do know. But Zed, it doesn't suck as much as it could have, and that's why we're having this conversation."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, the infection doesn't affect everyone the same way. Like the flu. Some people get it bad, some don't. Some die, most don't."

"So..." I prompted.

"Zed, when did you get bitten?"

"Sunday."

"And this is early Thursday morning."

I nodded.

"And what symptoms did you have?"

"I felt feverish within fifteen or twenty minutes, and then within a half hour or so, I passed out and stayed out for two days."

"What then?"

"Well, I woke up, disoriented, dehydrated, hungry as hell. I felt like crap."

"And your eyes, they were dilated, like they are now?"

"Yeah, I guess, I mean I didn't know until I got to the hospital. I just knew the sun and bright lights were bothersome."

Jerome said, "Yeah, that's because your eyes are permanently dilated now."

"That sucks."

"It could be worse." Jerome looked around.

"Are you saying that I'm not going to wind up like them?"

"I can't say for sure, but right now you and I are what they're calling slow burners."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"When somebody catches this infection," Jerome told me, "they develop a fever, usually pretty quickly, but sometimes it might take days to develop, depending on how they catch it. If the initial infection is small, it might take more time to develop enough of the virus in the body for symptoms to show."

"I'm guessing that happens in the case of sneezing and coughing transmission?" I asked.

"We're not certain yet, but maybe."

“Okay.”

“So, the symptoms almost always include a fever, headache, nausea, and sometimes diarrhea.”

“Like the flu?” I ask.

Jerome answered, “Yes, but there’s more. The fever gets high, like in the 104 to 106 range, in a hurry.”

“I know that’s not good.”

“No, it’s not. In most cases, brain damage occurs. Nerve damage occurs.”

“What kind of brain damage?”

“In most cases the frontal lobe is severely damaged. Pretty much everything that makes us human, such as complex thought, emotion, and empathy are debilitated or destroyed.”

“Fuck,” slipped out of my mouth again before I could catch it.

“The basic functions mostly survive, though in ten to fifteen percent of the cases, the host just dies. The ones that don’t die, end up like these guys.” Jerome pointed to the aimless, chaotic mass in the room.

“We’ve figured out that the body temperature after the initial fever correlates very strongly with brain function loss.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Did anyone take your temperature, Zed?”

I shook my head. “Not until I got here.”

“You seem pretty normal, like you’ve got your wits about you. I’m guessing you’re between ninety-nine and a hundred.”

“Where are you?” I asked Jerome.

“I got lucky, Zed. I come in at ninety-nine point three. Just over a half-degree above normal.”

“You seem normal.”

“I am. I’m a little klutzy. I’m little hyperactive, like I’m on a perpetual caffeine buzz, but I’m lucky.”

“And you think that’s where I’ll be?”

“I think so, Zed.”

“And you CDC guys call it a slow burn because the final temperature is above normal, but lower than these other guys?”

“Mostly right. For slow burners, the initial fever doesn’t go up to 106, and doesn’t stabilize too far above normal. The crazy guy that you were wrestling with when I walked up, he was probably running at about 102 to 103. The really whacked out ones in here, they’re above 104. With the high temperature, the metabolic rate shoots through the roof. They need calories like you wouldn’t believe. They probably need twice the calories that a normal person needs.”

"Wow." I said.

"Like I said, their metabolisms are running amok. They need to feed."

"So, are you sure I'm a slow burner?" I asked.

"Once the fever starts, the temperature can spike very fast, and they turn from normal to brain-damaged whack jobs pretty quickly, but for slow burners the whole thing usually runs its course in about two days. When you come out of it, based on what we know so far, you pretty much are what you are...mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Some continue to deteriorate."

"You mean their temperature goes back up?"

"Yes, slowly."

"And how many end up like us? How many are immune altogether?"

"Good questions, Zed. Our best data puts total immunity way below one percent, maybe a half, maybe a tenth."

"And?"

"Of the infected, it looks like maybe one in a few thousand end up like you and me."

"Is that genetic? Some kind of immunity?"

"We don't know why," Jerome answered. "This thing is moving so fast, it's outpaced our ability to learn what we need to know."

"So the others, the fast burners, what about them?" I asked.

"Over ninety percent of them end up with a total loss of higher brain function. They're all over 104. The remaining ten percent or so mostly come in between 101 and 104, with the temperature determining how much human is left in them."

"How much *human*?"

"Mostly, they're just like a bunch of very violent, cannibalistic, chimpanzees. Most don't think. They just want to eat and tend to their natural bodily functions. The ones that can think tend to lose any sense of empathy or morality. They're dangerous. They're vicious."

"Like the crazy guy from earlier?" I asked

Jerome nodded. "Yes, like him."

"He's dangerous?" I asked.

"Very."

"Great. So, what's the deal, then? All of these people are hungry and crazy? Are we in danger?"

Jerome shrugged. "Depends."

"On what?"

"One of the things about people that is usually underrated is the importance of the sense of smell."

“Go on.”

“Well this is my opinion, my theory, not the CDC’s position...”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said.

“I think that in the absence of the higher brain functions, the lower brain functions are no longer overlooked, even with all the confusion in a damaged brain.”

“So far this means nothing to me,” I said.

“When these guys start eating people, they prefer not to eat each other. I don’t think they like the way they smell. Maybe they smell the disease on each other.”

“Oh,” I interjected, “like those dogs that sometimes smell when their owners get sick. Yeah, I saw something about that on TV once.”

“Yes, I guess so,” Jerome agreed. “But, that doesn’t mean they won’t eat each other. They just aren’t their first choice.”

“So, are you telling me that they only eat people, and that they prefer healthy people?”

“No, they’re still human, just diseased humans. They’re still omnivorous. But, back in the refugee camp, where—and I hate to say it this way—the most plentiful food source was other people, that’s what they ate.”

I reluctantly pointed to the bloody spots on the floor. “Is that what happened here?”

Jerome got a distant look in his eyes and nodded. “Doctors and nurses.”

“But they ignored you,” I said.

“Yes and no.”

“Okay, what does *that* mean?” I asked.

Jerome said, “They ignored me for now, because I have the infection. I smell like them. But you and me, Zed, we’re slow burners, we’re mild cases. We smell more like healthy humans than they do.”

“Wait, *what*?”

“Zed, this gym they have us locked up in. This isn’t an original idea. This is pretty much the same thing we did in Kenya. We couldn’t keep them all in the hospital tents, so someone had the great idea to start corralling them all, just to get them under control. Because, I mean, what do you do with them?”

I shrugged.

“Well, when they got hungry, they didn’t go after each other first. I mean, not really. They went after the slow burners, because they smelled the most normal. Then they went after the crazy ones. The weak and injured ones, the ones that were easy prey and couldn’t defend themselves.”

“Then what?” I asked.

“They broke out of the corral and the refugee camp fell apart. It was a nightmare, and somewhere in that mess, the army just started shooting the infected down. That became government policy...maybe it already was, I don’t know. Maybe they thought it was the only way to contain the virus.”



"But it didn't work," I said.

"It was already too late when they started."

"So," I said, "by extrapolation, the longer we stay here, the more likely it is that we're either going to be eaten by everybody else in here, or the soldiers outside are going to come inside and just shoot us."

"Yeah, that about sums it up."

"Great." I looked down at Murphy and tried to assimilate all that I'd just been told.

Jerome asked, "When did your friend get bitten?"

"Twelve, eighteen hours ago, I guess. So, he's got a chance, right?"

"Zed, they're going to start getting hungry soon. If we go find some place out of the way, maybe up at the top of the bleachers by the windows, maybe they'll ignore us for a while, especially with your friend lying here helpless."

"That's fucked up," I told Jerome.

"It is what it is," Jerome said. "Once they start feeding again, they're going to eat your friend. You won't be able to do anything about it except get eaten too."

I shook my head. "I have an idea for a way to get out of here. If you want, you can help me with Murphy and come along. If not, you can fuck off and we'll give it a go without you."

"If you have an idea of a way to get out, Zed, you and I should just do that now. Murphy might come out of this, like us, or he might not."

I nodded. "I don't care. Murphy is coming with me. Are you?"

Jerome looked around. He wasn't pleased. "What's your idea?"

"Do you have a quarter?"

## Chapter 13

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Murphy was half-delirious, but Jerome and I managed to stand him up between us with one of his arms over each of our shoulders. Together, we shambled around behind the bleachers. Working Murphy through the monkey-bar framework of bleacher supports was not easy. He bumped his head and grumbled, but he kept his feet under himself.

I kept hitting my shins on horizontal supports that ran along at twelve inches above the floor. Jerome ran into everything.

"I'm not getting a warm fuzzy about this," Jerome told me. "Hiding under the bleachers isn't going to solve our problem."

"Be cool, man. I know what I'm doing."

A shriek ripped the air, followed quickly by others. There was scuffling on the basketball courts.

I looked questioningly at Jerome.

"The same thing happened earlier. They're feeding."

"It sounds like..."

"I know. We need to get out of here," Jerome urged.

We came to a stop at a square metal panel nearly half the size of a door on the wall.

"What's this?" Jerome asked.

"Give me the quarter. I need to get these screws out."

"Okay," Jerome said, tentatively. He pulled some change out of his pocket, passed me a quarter, and knelt down beside the panel.

"Help me with the screws," I told him. "I went to college here. When I was a freshman, we were out goofing around one night and we came across these utility tunnels. This access panel leads down to the tunnels. This is how we used to sneak in to see the volleyball games and stuff. One guy with a sports pass could come in and open up the panel and let the rest of us in."

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow," I confirmed. "If we get into the tunnel system, we can go nearly anywhere on campus. All of the buildings have access panels or doors into the basements."

Jerome went to work. There were eight screws. It would have gone faster with a screwdriver but you work with what you have.

With a few screws out, I heard the noise of somebody clumsily coming through the tangle of metal supports under the bleachers.

Jerome and I both looked. It was the crazy guy with the hippie sandals.

"Shit," said Jerome.

My fingers were getting sweaty and it was hard to hold on to the little quarter.

Another screw dropped to the ground followed quickly by the one Jerome was working on.

The crazy guy hollered, "They're gonna eat me! They're gonna eat me!"

Jerome stood and fished around in his pocket. He pulled out a folding knife with a four-inch blade, opened it and handed it to me. "Zed, I've got this. You need to take care of him before he draws the rest of them back here."

There was no time to argue. I begrudgingly took the knife. "Get that panel off."

I made my way through the supports toward the crazy guy.

"They're gonna eat me!" he yelled again.

"Be quiet," I told him, trying to keep my voice down.

He jumped up on a lower support, grabbed two vertical supports and used the weight of his body to shake them. The bleachers above rumbled with the vibration. He probably got the attention of every infected freak in the gym with that.

I hurried toward him to push him off, but when I got close, he leapt at me with his hands grasping and his mouth screaming.

It reminded me of my encounter with Dan. I stepped back to avoid his grasp and tripped over a support. The crazy guy came down on top of me.

In the struggle, I pummeled him in the head with the handle of the knife but it had no effect. He just kept yelling, and kept trying to pull my face closer to his mouth.

I lost my temper. I turned the pointed end of the knife at the crazy guy's skull and drove the blade deep through the bone. He went limp on top of me but his blood poured out onto me from the wound.

I pulled myself free and looked to the ends of the bleachers as I stood up. At least a dozen infected were trying to make their way underneath.

"Damn it!" I turned to Jerome. "They're coming."

By the time I got back down beside Jerome, there were two screws left. He was working on one. I went to work on the other.

Both ends of the bleachers were packed with the infected and they were coming our way. Whether to feed on the crazy guy or make a meal of us all, I had no intention of finding out.

Jerome's screw plinked to the floor. "We need to get out of here!"

My screw dropped out and the panel fell free.

I spun around and shook Murphy. "Murphy, you need to wake back up. We need to go, man." No response.

"Murphy!" I slapped him across the face, once, then twice. His eyes opened. Good.

I dragged him up off of his butt.

The first few of the infected reached the crazy guy's body and fell on him with their mouths open and their hands tearing at his clothes.

Jerome was already in the tunnel, climbing down the ladder.

I pushed Murphy's bulk toward the tunnel opening. It was hard. It was slow. The infected from the other direction were getting close. They started yelling and howling. They were excited.

"Murphy, turn around. It's a ladder!" I yelled. "Murphy, we gotta go!"

Murphy complied and we got his feet into the hole. He started down the ladder but halfway in, he stopped and stared at me in a daze.

"Damn it, Murphy! Move!"

There were eight or nine of the infected gorging themselves on the crazy guy. Other infected were flowing around the scrum and were eyeing me.

I leaned forward, put my hands on Murphy's shoulders, and pushed. "Move, Murphy!"

I felt his bulk move and then slide into the darkness. I knew it was about eight feet down to the floor of the tunnel, far enough to chance an injury but the alternative was to stay and die.

I felt fingers on my back, grasping at my shirt. All choices were gone save one. I dove into the hole.

## Chapter 14

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Through pure luck, the pursuing infected fell over one another coming through the hatch into the tunnel. In a tangle of bodies, with more piling in on top, none of them were able to pursue us until we were out of sight around a corner, and a few hundred yards down another long, straight tunnel.

When we were spotted, we made a quick turn down another tunnel that brought us expeditiously to an alcove with an unlocked door. That door led up to my old freshman dormitory. We hustled through and bolted it behind us.

The dormitory building was at least as old as Gregory Gym, but its last renovation was forty years behind, so it had no air conditioning. That meant that it was empty for the summer session of classes.

With keys pilfered from the administrative office, I led Murphy and Jerome up to the fifth floor, thinking for whatever reason that height equated to safety.

It was well past midnight when I unlocked the door and quickly piled into the room's hot, stagnant air. Once inside, closing and locking the door was top priority.

The dorm held four bunks and four empty desks. Jerome and I wrestled Murphy into one of the lower bunks and he passed out immediately on hitting the prone position.

"Pillow?" Jerome asked.

I looked around the room and didn't immediately see one. I shrugged. Just as well.

Two five-foot tall dormer windows faced south. The room was dark but I stood to the side and carefully opened each by about six inches, enough to let some air flow into the room, but not enough as to be noticed from the ground.

Below us, across a lawn the size of a football field and across an empty professor's parking lot, the gym from which we'd just escaped was alive with activity.

Jerome came up beside me to see what I was watching.

Soldiers were nervously walking in the parking lot, facing the building, talking, smoking, and keeping a ready hand near the triggers of their weapons. A group of police officers stood together, talking and gesturing at the gym.

What was going on? What was there to do about it? Those were the questions on everyone's mind, and no doubt, the topic of discussion below.

Still staring out the window, I said, "I need to go back down to the office on the first floor and see if the phone is working. There's a nurse I need to call."

"About what?" Jerome asked.

"She's one of the nurses from the hospital. She thinks I may have antibodies in my blood that might be helpful. She asked me to call her when I could."

Jerome shook his head vigorously. "That's a bad idea."

"Is she wrong?"

"Um...no. I mean...what's she going to do? She's busy caring for patients and shuttling them off to the gym over there. She won't be able to do anything with the

antibodies in your blood.”

“I didn’t say that she was going to do anything herself,” I argued.

A crashing sound pulled our attention back to the plaza below.

Several panes in the enormous gym windows had broken out and fallen to the concrete twenty feet below. Through the windows, I saw the full silhouettes of the infected standing along the top row of seats, pressing on the glass panes in the old metal frames.

A loud pop caught the attention of every ear in the plaza. One of the windows’ frames flexed across its entire width—roughly ten feet. More panes popped out and fell to the sidewalk. Before anyone below could react, a huge section of one of the window frames busted away from the wall and fell to the ground. Like water from a spigot turned fully on, the infected flowed out through the window.

There were cries of surprise from the soldiers. There were shouts for assistance.

The infected that landed on the ground first were soon covered by the bodies of others falling out on top of them. The bodies piled into a pyramidal mound up to the height of the window and became a squirming, screaming ramp that more of the infected stumbled down as they poured out of the gym.

Soldiers in the parking lot started shooting tentatively over the heads of the advancing wave of infected.

What I didn’t think of until that moment—and what I’m sure the soldiers didn’t realize until it was too late—was that they just weren’t dealing with rational humans beings. The hoard wasn’t frightened by the popping noise of the rifles.

In moments, the soldiers were in danger of being engulfed by the mass running at them.

The soldiers backpedaled and started shooting into the crowd.

Bodies erupted in bloody explosions where the bullets found their marks. Some of the infected fell, and some continued forward in spite of their wounds.

Many soldiers fell as the hoard overwhelmed them. Some retreated, but kept firing, and others broke and ran.

“Holy crap,” I muttered.

“You can say that again.”

More soldiers and police hurried around the corner from the front of the building to support the retreating men, but it was too late. The situation was beyond control. Their line collapsed under the onslaught of the infected.

Screams followed. Not the wild screams of the infected, but the terrorized screams of the dying. Gunfire died away or faded into the distance.

In the first battle I’d ever seen, the infected rolled over the soldiers without slowing down. As a reward for their victory, many of them feasted on the fallen bodies of the soldiers and policemen, who had been either too brave to flee or too slow to get away.

“God, that’s horrible,” I said.

Jerome backed into the darkness away from the window. "We don't want them to see us up here."

"The police?" I asked.

"The infected," he answered. "If they do, they may come after us."

"Can they?" I asked, "Figure it out, I mean. With their frontal lobes fried, is getting up here too complex of a problem?"

"I don't know, Zed. But I don't want to find out."

I stepped back from the window. "I don't either."

The battle wound down. The gunshots became less frequent. Most of the infected dispersed from the plaza.

I asked Jerome, "What next?"

"What next?" Jerome asked me, anger putting an edge in his voice. "You led us here. I figured you had a plan."

"Don't get pissed at me, Jerome. You're the guy from the CDC, who's supposed to know everything about this...this plague or whatever it is."

Jerome's anger disappeared as quickly as it had surfaced. "Plagues are bacterial. This is almost certainly viral."

"Whatever."

"Call it a pandemic."

"Double whatever. I'm no doctor. I'm the kind on the user end of the disease thing, Jerome. From here, plagues and pandemics are pretty much the same thing. Everybody catches cold. Everybody dies. Everybody turns into a mindless monster. From here, Jerome, it pretty much comes down to a bad something happening to everybody."

"You don't have to be a dick, Zed."

I thought I did have to be a dick. I was still a little pissed about Jerome ordering me to take care of the crazy guy back in the gym. He had a PhD and worked for the CDC, but that didn't make him my boss. I gave it a minute before I said, "Getting out of the gym was my only plan, at first. Like you said, we were in danger of getting attacked by the infected when we were in there. You were right about that. They seemed pretty anxious to get their hands on us when we were getting into the tunnel."

Jerome nodded.

"Once we got into the tunnel, the dorm was just the first place that came to mind as a place to hide out for a bit and figure things out. It seems to me that we're in a pretty crappy situation. The infected see us as a meal. To the uninfected, we're just more infected. To them, we're a danger, and apparently the currently accepted cure for infection is a bullet."

"The soldiers had to shoot them," Jerome said. "You saw what happened. They didn't have a choice."

I couldn't argue with that.

We stood there in the sweltering dorm room in silence for a good long while, listening to the sounds of the world falling apart outside.

Jerome broke the silence. "Whatever we do next, we need to keep an eye on Murphy."

Jerome was probably right about that, so I said nothing.

He continued, "We don't know for certain what he's going to be when his fever breaks...or doesn't break. If he comes out as a ninety-nine like us, then great. If he's 104 or up, we need to be prepared to do something about him."

"Do something?" I asked.

"Don't be coy, Zed. You can see where this is going. You did what you thought was right in trying to get him to the hospital in the first place, but things are different now, and they're going to hell in a hurry. We need to start thinking about survival."

"Survival?" I asked.

"The police. The fire department. Hospitals. Doctors. They aren't going to be here for us pretty soon. Maybe they're gone already."

I shook my head. "Will it really get that bad?"

"Zed, it's that bad or worse *everywhere* this thing has spread."

"But..."

"Zed, there aren't any buts. Look out the window. The infected are taking over."

What Jerome was telling me was a truth I didn't want to accept.

"We're going to have to look out for ourselves, Zed. At the very least, as you astutely pointed out, even if everything miraculously returns to normal, you and I are pariahs. We're infected. We'll have no one to take care of us but us. We'll be lucky if we're not gunned down. I don't see any happy endings for you or me, Zed."

I dropped into one of the desk chairs. Jerome was right, but I wasn't quite ready to deal with that level of bleakness.

"All I'm saying, Zed, is that we need to talk about what to do with Murphy. If he goes full 104 or up, we'll probably be able to escape if we decide quickly and execute our plan. But he's a big guy. If he wakes up with a reduced brain capacity and a big appetite, he might kill both of us before we can do anything about it. Hell, he might kill both us if we're fully prepared. He's a big, really strong guy. Zed, he's a time bomb."

Jerome was right about that. I didn't want to admit it, I didn't even want to acknowledge it, but he was right.

"Zed, I know you don't want to talk about this but we need to. We need to be ready to put him down if it comes to that."

"Kill him," I said. "That's what you mean."

"Of course that's what I mean. You know that. If he's 104, then it'll be him or us. We need to run or we need to kill him."

"How do you propose we put him down?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't have an answer to that. That's part of why we're talking now. If we wait until he comes back around, and he's a 104 and we're sitting here, or worse,



sleeping here, then we're dead."

"What do you suggest?"

"I think one of us should sneak outside once it settles down a bit and try to grab a gun or two from those dead soldiers or police down there."

"Excuse me for saying so, but that sounds a lot like suicide," I said.

"Yes, it's a risk, but I think we need to get 'em while the gettin' is good. I don't know how bad things will get but they're likely to get worse before they get better. We're going to need to be armed if we're going to survive this, and I don't just mean Murphy."

"What do you think the odds of your going down and getting one of those guns and getting back up here alive will be?" I asked.

"Probably a lot better than the odds of our still being alive an hour after Murphy wakes up as a 104, if we're not armed." Jerome suggested.

"Better?" I asked, "Why would they be better?"

"Right now, all of the infected are feeding. You have to remember, Zed, we're a food source of last resort for them. I don't think they like to eat each other."

I peered out the window. There were a hundred or more infected feeding on the bodies of the fallen soldiers.

"Or we could leave him here, Zed. Go find another place to hole up. I mean, what's your attachment to this guy, anyway? Is he your brother-in-law or something?"

"No. Well, he helped me out at the jail this morning."

"The jail? You were in jail?"

He said it in a condescending way that made me want to punch him. I decided that I didn't like him very much.

"It was bullshit, Jerome. My stepdad who I guess was infected, killed my mom and some guy from their church. The police arrested me because they thought I murdered them all."

"That's messed up."

"Yeah."

"So you just met Murphy this morning?" Jerome asked.

I nodded.

"And you helped him get to the hospital after he got bitten. And you saved him when we were in the gym. What'd he do for you at the jail?"

I said, "It's not important. But there's more."

"What?" Jerome asked.

"Murphy knows of a place in east Austin."

Jerome said, "You seem to cringe when you say that."

"It's not the best part of town."

"Pretty soon I don't think any part of town will be good. What kind of place is this?" Jerome asked.

"It's a bunker under some guy's house."

"And he's going to let Murphy in."

"He died a few years ago or something. He built this bunker under his house."

"And Murphy knows where it is?"

I nodded. I hoped.

"And he knows how to get in?"

"I don't know. His cousin Earl did."

"He did?"

"He got shot at the jail."

"Oh. If ever there was a time to need a survivalist's bunker, now would be it. Clearly, Murphy has some value. I think it's worth the risk to take a chance on him. I think you should go down and get a gun."

"Me? It was your idea."

"I know, but hear me out on this, Zed. I work for the CDC, I know about the outbreak. I'm an expert, the kind the world might need if we're going to get out of this with an intact society and you work for...Where do you work, Zed?"

"I have the most fulfilling job in the world," I said.

"What?"

"I put a legal, yet addictive, drug in the hands of jonesing addicts and make them happy."

"What are you talking about?"

"For a CDC employee you sure can't figure things out. I hope you're good at memorization."

"Stop playing games, Zed. C'mon, what it is it, like Starbuck's, or something?"

I nodded.

"I thought you went to college here. Did you party too much and drop out?"

"No, I got a philosophy degree."

"Oh."

"I'll get the guns."

## Chapter 15

---

I stood at the first floor doorway, looking out across the lawn and parking lot. To the east, bordering the plaza, stood the ROTC building and a maintenance building. To the west lay a street lined with enormous old oaks full of squawking grackles. Across the street was a six-story building consisting of classrooms and professors' offices.

Scattered across the lawn and parking lot lay the bodies and remnants of soldiers and policemen, all being eaten by the infected clustered around them.

Gunshots echoed regularly in the distance. Distant sirens wailed without end. The smell of smoke tainted the air. Ugly, low clouds hung in the sky, dirty orange in the light coming off of the city below.

I stood at the glass door on the first floor, one foot in the building, one foot out, weighing the risk of death on the bloody plaza against the risk of death tomorrow or the next day if I had no weapon to defend myself. I pondered the value of stealing weapons from men who'd died trying to defend themselves with those very weapons. Mostly, I tried to find a way around my fear.

I wondered if my fear was pointless. I wondered, with the infection coursing through my veins, if I was effectively dead already, whether I was just pretending to be alive until the virus finished destroying my brain.

I got angry for being afraid, for giving in to it. I swore to myself when I was twelve, on one of a thousand occasions when I cowered in my room, while the wrathful ogre stormed up the hall to scar my skin with his fists, his boots, and his belt, that I would not let fear rule me. I got up off my knees on that day and stood in the face of Dan's wrath. Through the years of living with the ogre and the harpy, I paid heavily for that choice, but what I got in return was a defiant strength that was impossible to measure.

So fuck Dan. Fuck the police. Fuck the doctors. Fuck Jerome. And fuck the infected!

I kicked the door open, reached over to a nearby garden, grabbed a heavy rock, and placed it between the door and the jamb.

Daring the infected to come at me, I stormed out onto the lawn.

I don't know what wild animals feel when they see strength in other animals—strength that they can't stand against—but I think they feel fear.

I walked up to the body of a policeman. The infected that were feeding there scampered out of my way. I picked up the officer's pistol. I was ready to put a bullet in the head of any infected that challenged me. They didn't. They kept their distance and went back to feeding.

I fished around in the remains of the officer's bloody garments and came up with his belt. The leather was torn through, but it held his spare ammunition clips. They seemed full. The poor guy didn't have a chance to reload before they overwhelmed him.

One of the infected got bold and snarled at me. I ignored him while I looked for anything else of value in the officer's remains.

With the officer's belt hanging over my shoulder and a pair of handcuffs in my pocket, I headed for the body of a nearby soldier. Whether my safety among the infected was a result of their fear of my anger or the satisfaction of their full bellies, it didn't matter to me at that moment. They showed little interest in me.

There wasn't much left of the soldier. His gory bones, uniform, helmet, and equipment were scattered widely across a red stain on the edge of the parking lot. The infected were done with him and had moved on.

I fell to my knees among the soldier's remains trying to figure out what to take. The rifle was a no-brainer. I reached over and scooted that over in front of my knees. The soldier's harness was covered in blood but looked to be intact. He'd have his extra ammunition and equipment stowed in pouches on the harness. I wanted it.

On hands and knees, I crawled over to the harness. Coming down off of the rage I felt after thinking about Dan, I started to think clearly. I glanced around quickly to assess my situation. I saw nothing out of the ordinary, out of the new ordinary, and naturally assumed that if I couldn't see a danger, then it didn't exist.

I stuffed the pistol into the front of my pants, picked up the soldier's rifle and harness, and stood.

"Hey!" someone yelled out of the darkness. It startled me. I froze, but the head of every infected in the parking lot turned toward a doorway at the end of the building across the street.

Suddenly, running seemed like a good idea. I turned and bolted away from the sound of the voice. A waist-high hedge cut across the lawn and would offer cover in case I needed it.

My intuition to run proved correct, because in the next moment, I heard the sound of gunfire. One, two, and then three shots shattered the relative calm in the quadrangle.

The infected were on their feet and staring at the source of the gunfire.

I jumped, rolling in the air as I cleared the hedge and landed hard on my back. Out of breath, I rolled immediately, then crawled away as fast as I could from where I landed.

Three more shots echoed and I saw the ground erupt in divots where I'd landed behind the bushes.

In a singular wave, the infected broke into a run toward the shooter. Howls from more of the infected carried up and down the street. Hundreds of running feet pounded closer on the asphalt.

I ventured a peek over the bushes and saw at least a dozen infected frozen in their poses, standing and staring straight at me.

It was time to go. I hoped the shooter came to that same decision and was bugging out in the other direction. I grabbed my equipment and sprinted for the dormitory's door.

## Chapter 16

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Back on the fifth floor, I knocked lightly on the dorm room door. "Jerome?"

Feet shuffled softly. The lock clicked. The door eased open. Jerome's face showed neither relief, nor surprise. He was a cold prick.

I stepped into the room, angry, but not sure at exactly who or what.

Jerome picked up on my mood as he closed and locked the door. "We both knew it was dangerous, your going out to get the guns."

Because you were too big of a pussy to do it, I didn't say.

He stepped toward me, expecting me to hand him one of the weapons.

I didn't.

I was planning to. I was going to. Just not at that moment. Jerome and I were going to have to figure out who the alpha was and I'd lost the first few rounds in that stupid game already. I didn't want to play, but I absolutely wasn't going to be subjugated by Jerome, either. I sensed that with him, there were only two choices: lead or follow. Cooperation wasn't on the table.

But at that moment, I had all the guns. I had all the power. I wanted that to be clear.

"Did anything change with Murphy while I was downstairs?" I asked.

Jerome shrugged and looked toward Murphy, leading my eyes along. Murphy hadn't moved.

I dropped the soldier's harness to the floor and fished a pair of handcuffs out of my heavy left pocket. "I got these for Murphy." I held them out to Jerome who just looked at them.

"That's a good idea, but he's your friend. You put them on," Jerome said.

"Whatever," I muttered, petulant.

I knelt by Murphy's bunk, careful to lay the rifle on the floor beside me. I cuffed Murphy's wrist to the bed frame by the wall.

"He's still burning up," I said.

Jerome hadn't moved an inch from his spot near the door. "It's the fever."

"He's starting to lose his color," I observed. "Why does that happen?"

"It's a complicated process."

"When you guys were studying this in Kenya, did you learn anything that might give us a clear indication of what Murphy will be like when he wakes up? Should we take his temperature?"

Jerome shook his head. "No. Temperature is one of the first things we looked at as a predictor. The ones that max on body temperature but regain their mobility quickly tend to be the ones with the greatest loss of intellectual capacity. The ones that linger, like Murphy, tend to have a better chance of coming out as a slow burn, like us. They

also have the highest mortality rate. But what you have to understand, Zed, is that nothing is clear-cut on this. Anything could happen.”

I took a seat on a bunk across the room from Murphy.

Jerome grabbed one of the desk chairs and sat down near me. “That was a good idea, getting the cuffs.”

I took the compliment at face value and thawed a bit. “Thanks.” I reached into my waistband, withdrew the policeman’s handgun, and held it out toward Jerome. “Are you cool with the pistol?”

“I think I’d prefer a pistol.”

“Cool,” I said. I hefted the rifle. “I think I’d rather have this thing for now. Oh, I think I’ve got three more clips for that pistol. I don’t know how many bullets come in a clip, though.”

“Depends on the gun, I guess,” said Jerome.

“Oh.”

“Zed, I don’t really know that much about guns.”

“Great,” I laughed. “I don’t know anything about them.”

Jerome looked down and started to explore the gun in his lap.

“Be careful,” I said.

Jerome’s expression made it clear that he didn’t want my trite advice.

I shrugged and started fumbling around with my gun, realizing quickly that I was out of my depth. I certainly knew what the trigger did and from which end the bullets came out, but I didn’t know anything about how to eject or load a clip. I didn’t know how or when to clean the thing. I knew that it was necessary. Gun people always talked about cleaning their guns. I didn’t know what kind of gun I had. It was some kind of military rifle, I knew that. Perhaps most importantly, I didn’t know whether or not it was empty, or even how to check, aside from pulling the trigger.

After some time spent experimenting with his weapon, Jerome said, “Thanks for going out and getting the guns. I didn’t really think you’d get shot at. I figured the only danger was from the infected, and most of them were feeding.”

I gave Jerome a nod. “I didn’t want to go out, but it had to be done.”

“And now we have guns we don’t know anything about.”

I smiled at the irony of it. “Jerome, why does it feel like we’re screwed anyway?”

“Possibly two reasons,” he answered immediately.

“Those would be?” I asked.

“One, we *are* screwed.”

I chuckled. “Is the other one better?”

“We don’t have a plan,” Jerome said.

“A plan. You might be right about that. What did you guys do in Africa? I mean, you made it out of there alive.”

Jerome nodded. "I don't know. I think we got lucky. First, when it became obvious that the infected were crossing borders into the other countries, then especially when we lost containment in the camp...I told you about the corrals, right?"

I nodded.

"The military came in and just started killing anyone that looked infected. I think I got out because I was white. I think I only made it onto the plane because no one else on the plane knew any more than I did about the infection. All of the doctors and other CDC personnel were as frightened as I was. I thought I was going to end up like the other infected. I figured that if I could get back to the states, I might have a better chance."

"It's just lucky genetics that have saved you."

"So far," Jerome added.

"So far," I agreed.

"The CDC didn't know what to do with me except quarantine me. They left me in the quarantine room until Austin started to blow up. By that time, they figured I wasn't contagious, but they also figured I wasn't going to get any sicker. So, I was the best candidate to send here. Well, a lot of other guys came, pretty much the A team. Austin is ground zero for the first outbreak in the states."

"I guess that's why I didn't hear about it," I said.

"You said you don't watch the news," Jerome chided.

"I'm not completely oblivious, but like you said, news stories about people dying in Africa don't register with me as unusual events. Like everybody in the western hemisphere, I've built up a tolerance to it. Why do you think the virus hit Austin, and not some place like New York, or Los Angeles?"

"Maybe it has by now," Jerome said, "if Africa can be used as any kind of template for the spread of the disease. As far as LA and New York go, the international airports have been shutting down and commerce came to a halt as the infection broke out in Europe and Asia. I think it came to Austin with a slow burner like you and me, Zed, only one that finished turning. There was a church group from Austin that was doing some kind of charity work in Uganda over the summer. They escaped on a chartered plane from Uganda and got back to Austin a few weeks ago, before people here knew the extent of the problem. I think it was someone in that group."

"A church group? Which church?" I asked.

"It was a long name. The Blood of Christ the Holy Redeemer Church or something like that."

"Christ, Jerome! That's where my mom and stepdad went to church."

"Probably where they caught it, Zed."

We stopped talking and I collected my thoughts for a few moments. "So, the bottom line is that it was luck that got you out of Africa alive."

Jerome nodded.

“Too bad,” I said. “I was hoping you guys had some proven protocols for getting through this kind of crap.”

Jerome shook his head. “We need to figure it out as we go along.”

I nodded. “Jerome, I don’t know what the worst case scenario is, but after everything I’ve seen since Sunday and after hearing about what happened in Kenya, I think we need to prepare for a worst case scenario.”

“I agree.”

So, plan we did, for the next few days anyway. The first decision we took was that we needed to take turns standing guard at night. It looked like literally anything could happen at any time. It wouldn’t do for us both to be sleeping when a bad situation developed.

We needed to store water in case things got really bad and it stopped flowing from the taps. Our most convenient source of food was the dozen vending machines in the recreation room on the first floor. With the fall semester just a week from starting, I hoped that those were fully stocked and waiting for freshmen’s quarters. Vending machine food would not be nutritious, but suffering through weeks of zero nutrition would be far better than suffering through long days of zero calories.

We needed information. The virus was in Europe, Asia, Africa, and now in the western hemisphere. The world was changing, and all we knew about it was what we could see the through the dormer windows. That wouldn’t do.

My smartphone was somewhere in the police station. Jerome’s cell phone was dead, and we had no cord with which to charge it. There were televisions in the rec room, but the rec room was on the first floor with lots of large windows. Turning those televisions on would attract the infected. There were a few computers, presumably with internet connections, in the rec room as well. They were set up for student access and required a password, so they were useless to us.

We were going to have to leave the dormitory and venture back out among the infected again. That was an unappealing thought, especially with the sound of gunfire ringing across the city.

Aside from brainstorming, we came up with few specifics. The hour was late. I was tired. I was hungry. In fact, I felt starved. I thought about when I’d last consumed any calories. Was it the tequila shots I’d drunk on Sunday morning? No, perhaps the sports drink from the fridge on Tuesday. I needed to eat something.

I said, “We need to go down and raid those vending machines tonight.”

“Do you think that’s wise?” Jerome asked.

“If not, then we need to chase down one of those infected bastards so we can eat *him*.”

“Are you serious?” Jerome asked, nervously.

“Dude, it was a joke.”

“You never know, nowadays.”

I rolled my eyes. “I haven’t had anything to eat in days.”



Jerome said, "One of us should stay here and keep an eye on Murphy and one of us should go down."

I looked expectantly at Jerome.

"What?" he asked.

"*What*, what?" I responded, "I went out and got the guns."

"We talked about that. Not to say that my life's more valuable than yours, because it's not, but I have expertise that can help us fix all this." Jerome shrugged. "You don't."

This was going to get old in a hurry. "Whatever."

I stood up and headed for the door, then turned. "I don't suppose you know how to break into a vending machine, do you?"

Jerome shook his head.

"Great."

As it turned out, the damned things were resilient as hell. Kicking in the glass fronts, like they always did in the movies, proved to be a futile, noisy waste of time. I tried beating one with a fire extinguisher. Again, useless noise. What I finally settled on was a seat cushion I had pulled off of one of the couches in the rec room. With that folded around the barrel of my rifle, I pressed it against a vending machine's lock and pulled the trigger. The front of the machine popped open.

It was louder than I'd hoped it would be, but not as loud as the kicking and beating I'd already tried.

I crept over to each of the nearby windows and checked on the state of the infected outside. None seemed to be paying the building any special attention.

I repeated the process on the lock of a soda machine, gathered up what I needed, and headed upstairs with ten thousand calories of assorted junk foods and carbonated drinks.

## Chapter 17

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Back in the room, I had first watch, so Jerome wasted no time in lying down on a bunk and closing his eyes. I took some pleasure in his squirming for twenty minutes as he tried to find a comfortable spot on the narrow, thin mattress.

The tower that stood at the center of campus showed that the time was close to three a.m. I drank two colas and ate a bag of chips, a candy bar, and some mixed nuts. I hoped the caffeine in the sodas would keep me awake for the next several hours.

I sat near the window, with Jerome's light snoring and Murphy's heavy breathing behind me. There was some gunfire nearby and more far away.

At around four in the morning, a battle erupted to the southeast near the hospital involving many guns and countless gunshots. Eventually it petered out, with no hint as to its resolution.

Far on the east side of town, I saw the glow of orange fire against a rising column of smoke. That was not good. Well into our third summer of drought, any fire, if not quickly controlled, would grow out of hand.

The smoke column rose and drifted to the north with the winds that flowed inland off of the gulf during the summer.

Fires were inevitable. Severe watering restrictions and months without rain left most lawns in Austin dry and brown. Non-native trees were dying all over the city. Even the old live oaks were under stress. For the first time in my life, I'd seen oaks killed by a drought. Any random spark from a gunshot had a chance of finding dry tinder on which it could feed.

Hours passed. The morning sun began to steal away the darkness in the eastern sky. It was my turn to sleep. With difficulty, I woke Jerome, planted him in the chair, and lay down on my bunk. I was out instantly.

## Chapter 18

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When I awoke, the room was stiflingly hot. I was drenched in sweat. The bright, late morning sun was shining in the window. The chair where I'd left Jerome was empty.

"Shit!" I sat up. Lightheaded, I swung my feet to the floor. I looked at the door; it was closed. In a flash of panic, I looked down to the floor, where I'd laid my gun and shoes by the bed. They were just as I'd left them. I reached down and scooped up the gun, a habit I figured I'd need to develop. The sound of Jerome's snoring drifted down from the bunk above.

"Lazy bastard," I muttered. I considered rudely slapping him back to consciousness but it would serve no purpose other than to satisfy my anger over his irresponsibility. He needed sleep as badly as I did, so I let him lie.

I walked over and checked on Murphy. He was still out. I shook him lightly to see if he'd wake. I got no response.

I sat in the chair I'd used the night before and looked out. The window was closed so I pushed it open to let the breeze flow in. It smelled of smoke and tasted of ash. The fires in east Austin had grown while I slept. Huge billows of black smoke hung in the eastern sky, casting an ominous threat over the old houses and ancient trees below.

I flexed the fingers on my left hand. They remained fully functional, though my arm still felt swollen around the bite. I needed antibiotics, or at least I thought I did. If I was going to survive the virus, I didn't want to get killed off by a secondary infection.

I thought about running downstairs to grab some cold sodas from the vending machine I'd cracked open the night before, but with my two companions still asleep, it seemed like a bad idea. I settled for a breakfast of cold strawberry toaster pastries and warm soda. I leaned back in the chair and let the caffeine and sugar work their magic on my throbbing brain.

Loiterers wandered through the plaza below. As each came into view, I'd wonder whether they were normal or infected. In the bright morning light, especially with my dilated pupils, it was hard to discern the hue of their skin. It wasn't until they came upon the remains of one of the fallen soldiers that I knew; they'd drop to the ground and scour for morsels.

Every single one was infected.

Just as when I went to bed, gunfire still rang in the distance, but at an ever-quickenening frequency.

I saw an upper corner of Brackenridge hospital off to the southeast, but couldn't tell if the military presence there had benefited them or not. I saw no movement. I wondered whether Steph the nurse was still there, still alive.

What appeared to be a traffic helicopter flew over from time to time, but I never saw the Star Flight helicopter land at the hospital. I suspected that was a bad sign for the hospital.

Alternatively, I spotted a contrail from an airliner high above. That was good. The whole country hadn't fallen apart overnight, at least not that I could tell. But in truth, I

didn't know. The airplane could have been Air Force One spiriting the president off to safety on an isolated Pacific island.

At least Murphy, Jerome, and I were in a safe spot for the moment.

I wondered how long the crisis could last, how deeply everything would be affected. I felt foolish for even considering it, but I wondered how much of human civilization would be left when it was over. What if it was never over?

I needed information. I needed news. Absent that, I needed to prepare for the end of the world, or at least the end of modern civilization.

And what did that mean for me? I grew up in a city. I had a degree in philosophy; as useless an education as one could have in a world where figuring how to get your next meal and how not to become one might be as difficult as it had been a few thousand years ago. The great "why" questions of life very suddenly held zero importance.

There was only one real question. *Did I want to live or not?*

There would be no room for ambivalence, no room for anything but a desperate drive to survive another day, at whatever cost. Anything less would likely lead to death.

I considered for a moment how that would affect humanity in general, how it would affect my humanity. What would I become if I survived? Would I turn into a vicious brute?

I wanted to slap myself. I was already doing it. I was overthinking it.

If this was the beginning of the end of civilization, the only question was that of survival. That was it.

I amended the thought to include the survival of my friends. With the harpy rotting on her living room floor, at least I didn't have to wrestle with the moral ambiguity of not having added her to the equation.

Information!

It occurred to me that I needed information on everything. I needed to know how to work that damned gun in my lap. I needed to know about warfare and tactics. At least all those of weekends playing in paintball tournaments hadn't been wasted time...I hoped.

And what about survival in general? I could barely cook, let alone farm and hunt. What would it take to get clean water? How would I know it wasn't infected? I needed some medical supplies, not just for my arm, but for whatever might happen tomorrow or on any of a thousand tomorrows. What if I wanted electricity? How would I generate that? If this was the end of the world, our infrastructure would soon start breaking down. Water, electricity, the phone system would all go away, one at a time. And the internet...

The internet!

That was it. The internet was, if anything, the storage place for man's accumulated knowledge. All of the information I needed was there, right now. I needed to find a way to get it. That, perhaps more than any other single thing, would be the key to long-term survival. Not just for me, but for anyone.

The sound of gunfire drawing near pulled my attention back to the now. I couldn't guess how many people were firing, but it was more than a half-dozen and probably less than a few dozen. I stood and tried to discern a direction, but I couldn't. There were too many large buildings on campus, too many flat surfaces to echo off of.

I wondered if rescuers had arrived. I wondered if all of my thinking and planning were just wasted speculation.

Movement in the bushes down and to my left caught my eye. Between the cars, out of doorways and gaps between buildings, I saw dozens of heads pop up. Through the broken windows of the gymnasium across the quad, I saw movement...lots of movement. The gym was overrun with the infected. Just as they had done the night before, they flowed out of the broken windows.

The blast of loud rifle fire caught my attention and I looked left. Coming around the corner on the east side of the gym was a squad of soldiers, weapons up, shooting the infected as they came into view.

The rate of fire increased as the soldiers filed into the plaza. Every infected in their line of sight was going down.

The soldiers were hunting the infected and killing them.

Holy crap!

Up close, the infected were humanoid monsters. At a distance, they still looked like people.

I was taken aback. Any doubt I had was erased. It was open season on the infected.

I was infected.

The soldiers confidently moved into the quad, killing the dozens of infected that they had disturbed there. They shot at the mass flowing out of Gregory Gym. From the west, a growing trickle of infected ran in from the center of campus.

The eight soldiers stood in a rough line across the quad about five or ten feet apart and shot down the rabid infected as they appeared.

The rate of fire increased to a steady din. I looked behind me. Murphy lay as comatose as the night before. Jerome snored as though nothing was going on. It was time he woke up.

I stepped over and let some of my frustration toward him out in a slap across the face. It was mean, but it felt good.

Jerome sat up immediately. A hand went to his cheek and he looked blearily at me. "Wha-?"

He heard the gunfire and looked to the window.

"Something's happening," I said. "Time to get up."

I knelt in front of the window, giving me a good view without making my presence too easily visible.

More and more infected were funneling into the quad from the west.

The soldiers started to glance toward one another and move closer together. They were getting nervous. I would have been too. The hunt was turning into something they hadn't expected.

From my high vantage, I saw the beginning of the end.

From a gap between the buildings to the rear of the soldiers, I saw a few, then a dozen infected running up behind them. The soldiers were so focused on defending themselves from the flow of infected in front of them that they were unaware of those behind.

I flung the window open wide and leaned out. I yelled, waved my arms, and pointed, but the tunnel vision that focuses your attention on the mortal threat right in front of you prevented them from noticing me.

I vainly yelled some more as the infected behind the soldiers closed the gap.

I raised my rifle and pointed it toward the now solid mass of infected flowing between the buildings behind the soldiers. There were thousands.

I pulled the trigger and a burst of several bullets ripped toward the horde. Whether I hit anything or whether the mass flowed over my downed targets, I couldn't tell. The mob surged ahead in blind hungry rage.

I fired again.

Jerome's lips were in my ear, yelling, "Don't! They can't know we're here!"

Whether he was talking about the soldiers or the infected, I didn't know or care in that moment.

The soldiers, like the ones the night before, were going to get slaughtered. I had to help.

I fired again but the soldiers were already doomed.

The first of the flanking infected jumped on one of the soldiers from behind. The soldiers beside the downed soldier turned and saw the horde coming. I tried not to imagine the terror he must have been feeling.

I thought to run downstairs, swing the dormitory door open, and find a way to get the soldiers to come in, but they were surrounded before I completed the thought.

The soldiers' formation collapsed as they tried to retreat under the onslaught, but there was nowhere to go.

The frequency of gunshots rapidly diminished as one by one the soldiers fell.

I pulled my gun back in the window, squatted, and watched the horror of another eight humans getting shredded and eaten by a mob of rabid monsters.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered.

"I told you," Jerome said. "It gets ugly."

I turned my back to the wall, set my rifle down, put my face in my hands, and leaned back. There were tears in my eyes. The shock of what I'd just seen had gotten to me; all that I'd seen was getting at me. I had to get my emotions under control. I had to toughen up if I was going to survive.

*The ogre and the harpy.*

*The ogre and the harpy.*

They were shitty parents, but if anybody was emotionally prepared to deal with the world the way it was at that moment, it should have been me.

## Chapter 19

---

Not far away, four or maybe five blocks, the sound of another battle echoed through the gaps in the buildings. Whether the gunfire represented a failed rescue attempt for the soldiers in the quad or another doomed hunting party, I would never know. All of the infected who couldn't squeeze themselves close enough to a dead soldier for a meal turned their attention to the sound of the new gunfire and ran off in that direction.

"How can there be so many, so fast?" I asked.

"I told you what Kenya was like."

I nodded like I understood. Sure, I'd heard his description, but I hadn't assimilated it. I didn't believe it could be that bad.

"Do you know how many people are in Austin?"

"In the city limits, or in the area?" I asked.

"Diseases don't see political boundaries," Jerome responded.

"A million, maybe more."

"You can round off the numbers any way you want, but if there aren't around a million infected out there right now, there will be by the end of the week."

"That's a pretty bleak outlook," I observed.

"I'm just telling you what I know."

"You don't think—"

Jerome interrupted me, "No. I don't think. There is no hope. There is no cure. There is no way to stop it or slow it down."

"Is that the CDC's position, or your opinion?"

"It doesn't matter right now, does it?"

"Yes, it does. It tells us what we need to plan for." Regardless of how much I agreed, I didn't want to let go of the hope that this wasn't the end. I liked drinking beer on Saturday night. I liked watching football. I liked casual sex. I loved air conditioning. I liked living without fear.

"Plan for the worst."

I turned my attention back out the window.

We sat there and silently watched the infected feed.

After a while, I said, "We'll need more weapons and more ammo."

Jerome nodded. "Are you going down again?"

"Of course." I made little effort to mask my irritation.

"I don't think you'll get shot at again," Jerome told me. "I doubt there are any soldiers around that would mistake you for a zombie or a looter or whatever. It should be safe."

"Provided the infected don't eat me." More sarcasm.

"They didn't last time. It should be safe," Jerome countered.



"But I'm still going."

"I could go, Zed. But you and I both know the unfortunate truth. I'm an epidemiologist. Expertise like mine isn't going to be easy to come by in the future. If we as a society ever want to have a chance at returning to normal, we're going to need people like me. You decide, Zed. I'll go if you want me to."

I turned away and picked up my MOLLE vest. I wished I'd taken the time the night before to rinse it off in one of the shower stalls. At least the blood on it was dry. It was serviceable.

As I checked my ammunition clips, I told Jerome, "I agree that we need to prepare for the worst-case scenario. I thought about it a lot this morning."

"Yeah?"

"I don't know if this is where we're going to end up for the long haul, but in the absence of an alternative, we need to hoard as much water, food, and ammunition as we possibly can. Do you know anything about this end of the world stuff? You don't happen to be a closet survivalist, do you?"

Jerome shook his head. "I've killed zombies in video games, but that's about it."

"Did you grow up on a farm? Do you know anything about agriculture?"

"No, nothing," Jerome answered.

I opened the door and said, "A couple of things. I think that if this really is going to get as bad as it looks right now, and if we manage to live through the first six months or a year, you know what is going to make the difference between long-term survival or starvation?"

"Lots of guns?" Jerome answered.

"No." How could this guy have a PhD in anything? "Information."

"I don't follow."

"Jerome, we don't know jack about how to take care of ourselves once the grocery stores empty out. We don't know how to farm. We don't know how to hunt. We don't know how to preserve food. We don't know how to purify water. We don't know anything about providing for ourselves that doesn't involve a grocery store, an electric bill, or the internet.

"We need to gather up as much information on those subjects as we possibly can, before the internet goes down and we're stuck with nothing."

"But what good will it do in digital form? There won't be any electricity."

It was time to talk to him like he was a child. "Jerome, there are solar chargers for laptops out there. We just need to find them. Hell, maybe we can even set up some solar panels on the roof and have electricity. But we don't have any idea how to install that stuff. Jerome, my point is that we can download a ton of information onto a flash drive. We'll be able to work out a way to read it later when we need it, but we need to find a way to get busy on that as soon as possible."

Jerome nodded. "Yeah. I agree."

"Oh, and one more thing. I'm not going to prop the door open downstairs with all of the infected running around. They could wander in here."

"And?"

"Jerome, you need to come downstairs and mind the door while I go outside. If I come running back in a big hurry again, you need to be ready to open it up for me."

Jerome just looked at me for several long moments as though I'd spoken another language.

"Jerome?"

"Who's going to keep an eye on Murphy?"

"We have bigger problems than Murphy right now. I need your help here Jerome."

"Yeah, fine. I'll take care of the door for you."

"Then grab your gun and c'mon. Do you know how to work it yet?"

"I pull the trigger."

"Did you figure out how to change the clips last night, and turn the safety on and off?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"I hope so. Our lives are going to depend on these guns."

"Yeah," Jerome conceded. "I know."

By the time we got downstairs, most of the infected had wandered off to chase other noises and presumably other prey. There were less than a few dozen in the quad, squabbling over the scraps of the dead.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked.

Jerome looked through the glass at the carnage in the quad and nodded nervously.

"Okay," I said, "when I go out, don't let the door slam behind me. I don't want too much attention."

"Okay."

Fear elevated my heart rate, moistened my palms, and hastened my breathing.

I chanted my new mantra in my head. *The ogre and the harpy. The ogre and the harpy.*

There was no telling what might happen when I went out. Rational thought told me that the infected weren't interested in eating me, but the world had just changed. I needed to change my assumptions along with it. My assumption last night that people wouldn't randomly shoot at me had nearly gotten me killed.

I drew a deep breath and pushed on the door handle. "Here goes."

I walked slowly out of the building, across the sidewalk, and onto the grass. I wanted zero attention.

*The ogre and the harpy.*

Only a few infected were left at the carcass of the first soldier I came to. I gathered up all that looked useful: another assault rifle, more ammunition, and a radio. The

infected showed some interest in me at first, but realized quickly enough that I was one of them. My skin was pale. My eyes were dilated, like theirs. I wondered if I'd end up like them. I shuddered at the thought.

I went back to the door where Jerome waited. As planned, he opened the door and I dumped the goods on the floor inside.

Jerome smiled and nodded at me. "Good job."

I smiled back, turned, and mouthed, "Fuck you, Jerome." I headed out to scavenge the next dead soldier.

By the time I arrived at what was left of the fourth soldier, I had a total of six full clips for my assault rifle, plus a pistol in a holster and three clips for it. An infected was trying to pull some bloody, meaty bones out of the soldier's tactical vest. I grabbed the vest and wrestled with it, hoping to dislodge the infected and his prize. The vests, I had learned, held all the extra ammunition that the soldiers carried, plus other goodies.

I heard a woman's scream echo from a few blocks to the west. I immediately looked up, as did every infected head in the quad.

While I squatted, frozen in the grass, evaluating the situation, the infected around me showed no evidence of such a paralyzing thought process. They were on their feet in an instant, heads swiveling to pinpoint the source of the sound.

Several of the infected started moving toward the chemistry building across and just down the street. Half of the rest followed at a walk or run. Many started to sprint.

I shot a glance toward Jerome, looking for advice I guess, but I only saw a reflection on the tinted glass of the closed door.

My survival instincts told me to run back to the door and get inside. With a live screaming human back in the picture, I had no idea what kind of feeding frenzy the infected might get into. I didn't know if I'd get attacked.

The scream echoed again, closer this time.

"Shit."

No infected were near me; they were all moving in pursuit.

I double-checked that the safety on my assault rifle was off and brought it up to my shoulder. I pointed it out in front of me, the same way I used to carry my paintball gun. I checked over each of my shoulders to ensure that there were no infected flanking me.

I was safe for the moment.

Chastising myself for the mistake I was sure I was making, I started walking toward the source of the sound. It was a fifty-foot breezeway cut through the building at its midpoint.

A scream for help echoed out of the breezeway.

The infected from the quad swarmed toward the opening. More came from up the street. Those that could, sprinted. The injured among them hobbled or crawled.

The situation was clear. If the screamer came through that breezeway toward me, toward the hundreds of infected already running toward her, she was dead. They'd shred her before she made it to the street.

I flipped the switch on my gun to full auto and without an intelligent, restraining thought, I squeezed the trigger.

*The ogre and the harpy.*

The infected I saw down my barrel fell. As the mass of them heard my gunfire, they skittered to a halt and turned toward me. I knew from watching the soldiers earlier that the balance of my life would be measured in seconds if I didn't move my feet. The sound of my weapon would draw every infected from blocks around. Even if I did have enough ammunition to kill them all, they'd surround me—they'd come too fast.

My thirty-round clip emptied. I ejected it, grabbed another from my vest and slapped it into the receiver. I mercilessly sent another thirty rounds into the horde moving in my direction.

I put in another clip. I checked my flanks and pulled the trigger.

No one came out. If someone had been running through, unless caught by the infected, they should have been out onto my side of the building.

I lost hope and regretted my attempt to assist the screaming woman.

I backpedaled, and shot at the infected closest to me. I prepared to make a dash for the dormitory door and safety.

Movement to my left caught my eye. From around the end of the Chemistry building, just across the street from where I stood, a terrified girl came running.

"Uh oh!" I immediately emptied another clip to buy some seconds.

I ejected my clip and pushed in another as the girl started to cross the street. A half-dozen bloody infected pursued. She must have seen me as a chance to escape, because she ran right at me. I leveled my weapon at the infected behind her.

The three closest fell to my fire. I missed the fourth and got the sixth. Just as she got to me and with number four crossing the street, I fired another burst and his head exploded in a red mist. Number five tripped over the body. We had some time.

The girl's eyes were wide. She was gasping for air.

"We need to move!" I told her, fear and excitement turning it into a yell. I spun and raced for the door. She didn't need further direction, and stuck with me step for step.

As we closed the distance to the door, I saw a few, then more infected coming up the gap between the buildings up ahead...the same gap they'd come through to get behind the dead soldiers in the quad.

Panic was setting in as we reached the door. It didn't swing open.

"Damn it, Jerome!" I grabbed the handle and pulled.

"Hurry!" the girl screamed.

I pounded my fist on the glass. "Jerome!"

"Hurry!"



## Chapter 20

---

I put my back to the door and scanned the quad. Perhaps twenty infected had just come off the street in front of the chemistry building and had rounded the corner off to our right.

A half-dozen infected were coming up in front of us, angling across the quad from the gap between the buildings to our left.

I could only think of one way out. "C'mon!"

I ran directly at the six infected who were angling across the quad and hoped the girl had the courage to follow or the good sense to run the other way while the infected were focused on me.

The gap closed between me and the infected rushing at me. I put the rifle to my hip, came to a sudden stop not ten feet from the closest in the group, and fired. They all fell as the clip ran dry.

I switched my clip and took out the closest of the pursuers behind. I shot another burst and realized that shooting more of the chasing infected was a futile effort. For each one shot, more filled in from those running up behind.

"C'mon!" I shouted at the girl. It was going to be a foot race for our lives.

I accelerated to a full sprint with the girl lagging behind. I slowed a tad, so that I didn't leave her panicking and too far back.

I headed for the far side of the gym and prayed that when I rounded the corner, I'd be welcomed with an empty plaza.

I made it to the corner and overshot it at full speed. I didn't want to make the turn blindly and step into the waiting arms of a lucky infected who might be there.

Fortunately, there was not one. Aside from those that I'd shot coming across the quad, any others from that side of the gym must have run around the gym in the other direction when they heard the noise of the gun and the screams.

The girl rounded the corner and she followed me toward the building's entrance. The infected were getting close.

We made it to the doors and I thanked God that they weren't locked. I swung one open and motioned the girl toward the door on the other side of the wide hall that led onto the basketball court. I stopped, fretted over my choice for half a second, and gambled. I shoved the barrel of the rifle through the looped metal handles of the double doors, effectively barring them. That wouldn't keep the infected out, but it would buy us some time.

Just as I let go of the rifle, I heard the girl's scream from inside on the court.

"Shit!" I drew my pistol and ran through the doors and onto the waxed wooden floor.

The girl had come to a stop just past the bleachers. I came in to see a bloody mess of bodies. Most were shot but not all were dead. None appeared to be completely mobile. Those that could move at all squirmed and crawled toward us.

“Let’s go.” I led the girl across the gym, hoping to get behind the far bleachers before the infected mob broke through the doors and saw our escape path.

The infected on the floor moaned and screamed their frustration at not being able to get their hands on us.

We made it under the bleachers and were halfway to the entrance to the tunnel system when I heard the gym’s door give way.

“We need to hurry.”

Stepping clumsily over the shin-high cross braces we arrived at the entrance. Dozens of the infected entered the gym, and their howls echoed through the cavernous space.

The girl saw where we were going and hesitated.

With no time for convincing, I simply said, “C’mon,” and jumped feet-first into the tunnel. I landed hard, eight feet below on the concrete floor and rolled forward into the pipe-covered wall.

I looked up. The girl was doing some combination of climbing and falling down the ladder.

Once she hit bottom, I held up a hand to bring her to a stop and a finger to my lips to beg her silence. Dead, noiseless air was our only friend at that moment.

If there were any infected in the tunnel already, the shadows kept the secret of their presence.

I pointed the pistol in front of me and waved for the girl to follow.

## Chapter 21

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The girl and I jogged quietly up the tunnel. I thought about the eventual failure of the electrical grid. How long would that take? The thought made me nervous. I had no flashlight and no matches. A failure at that moment would have left us in fatal darkness. I made a mental note of another assumption from the previous week's life that I needed to discard—the dependability of electricity.

On one evening in the near future, nighttime would slither up over the horizon, and planet Earth would again know real darkness and the terrors that lurked there.

We followed the same route that Murphy, Jerome, and I had followed the night before. The tunnel sat parallel to the road that ran between the dorm and the chemistry building. It stretched the length of the campus from north to south.

Thankfully, I saw no movement in the distance in front of us, but that might not be the case once the infected that chased us into the gym discovered our escape route and followed us into the tunnel. The noise they'd make would alert anything in the tunnel to our presence. With only a few magazines for the pistol, I knew I couldn't defend us for long if any infected swarmed toward us.

We needed an exit.

I made a right turn into the tunnel that led under the dorm that held Murphy and Jerome safely on the fifth floor. "Fuck," I muttered.

The girl stopped, startled.

I shook my head to indicate that my utterance held no meaning.

"Almost there," I whispered, pointing up the tunnel. "We'll be safe when we get through that door at the end." Of course, I didn't mention that that was based only on the hope that the building wasn't full of the infected.

I jogged down the tunnel with the girl close behind.

I had no faith that Jerome had come down and unlocked the door in the dormitory's basement; so little, in fact, that I didn't slow my pace as we came upon the alcove that kept the door to our dorm hidden from view. I focused instead on the doorway that led into the next building over.

As I stepped in front of the shadowy alcove, I caught a blur of movement to my left. Before I could do little more than raise a protective arm, I was slammed hard against the other wall, with the weight of three struggling bodies pushing me to the floor.

They were infected.

For the second time in less than a week, a human jaw full of dirty teeth ripped into my left forearm.

I struggled to pull my pistol out. Just as I got hold of the handle, the infected biter threw her head back, grimaced in disgust, and spat my blood from her mouth.

She pushed forward with her arm to get off of me. The girl was a tastier focus for her hunger. The other two infected gathered their feet beneath themselves.



As their weight came off, my pistol came free. I pressed it against the back of the head of the infected on top of me and pulled the trigger. His face exploded onto the concrete floor of the tunnel in front of him.

The other two infected looked back, stunned for a moment by the explosive report of the pistol.

I raised the pistol and shot one in the face. She fell across my legs as the other stepped back toward the girl. I shot him twice in the back. He fell but didn't die.

The girl backed away from the writhing monster.

I squirmed out from underneath the bodies on top of me, stood, and fired a fourth bullet. It found home in the skull of the squirming infected. He went limp.

The girl's eyes were wide with shock. I probably had the same look on my face. We stood there for a second with overloaded brains and ringing ears.

A riot of screams echoed up the tunnel from whence we came.

"Oh, my God," the girl mumbled.

We bolted at full speed toward the far end of the tunnel.

Please, God, let the door be unlocked.

A dozen seconds later, I was at the door with my hand on the knob. The life of the girl, and possibly my life, depended on whether it would turn.

I torqued the knob.

The locking mechanism inside clicked free.

I yanked hard on the door and the girl and I stepped into a dark, quiet basement.

I wasted no time in slamming the door shut, but there was no deadbolt, no latch. The only way to lock it was with a key. There was no key in sight.

I scanned the dim room for something with which to secure the door.

"Damn it!" I said. "We need to keep going. They'll figure out soon enough that we're in here. When they do, we won't be able to keep that door shut."

The girl and I looked around. The basement was large, the size of a few classrooms. At its center stood an enormous heating and cooling unit. The walls were stacked with dusty junk and shelves. At the far corner, a staircase led down from a door at the top. The girl was already running toward it.

I gave one more glance to the door, hoping desperately to see a lock that I knew wouldn't be there. Confirmation of the lock's absence sent me running to the stairs.

The girl reached the door at the top of the stairs before I made it to the first step. She grasped the handle with both hands and rattled it loudly in its frame. It was locked.

"No!" she yelled.

"Damn!" I looked around. A chance at living returned when I spotted an elevator door to my left. It had been hidden from our view by the heating unit in the center of the room. I ran over and pressed the button. It responded with a faithful amber light.

I looked up at the girl with the last of my hopes on my face.

She looked back, frozen with the door handle in her hand, waiting for who knew what. I urged the elevator to hurry with my body language. The sound of the infected filled the hall outside the basement door through which we'd just come.

Ding.

The elevator was arriving.

Relief.

The girl bounded down the stairs as the door to the tunnel banged hard. The infected had arrived.

The girl yelped something I didn't catch.

The light from the elevator seeped through the seam between the doors. It was one level up. I stepped around the heating unit to see the tunnel door. It was jiggling and coming a few inches open, before slamming shut again under the weight of the infected crowding the tunnel behind it.

The doors of the elevator opened. The girl jumped in and pushed a button. I was immediately beside her. I pressed the button to close the doors just as the infected burst into the basement. Their frustrated screams echoed through the space as the doors pulled together.

I inhaled a breath of relief, then raised my pistol and steeled myself for a danger I just knew would await us when the door opened again.

The girl looked at my unsteady hand holding the raised pistol. She put her back to the wall of the elevator.

*The ogre and the harpy.*

The elevator dinged to announce its intention to stop on the building's ground floor. I looked down at the panel. The light for the top floor glowed.

I drew a full clip from the pouch on my vest. I didn't intend to die while fumbling for a cartridge full of bullets.

I pointed the pistol at the seam between the elevator doors. "Push that close button as soon as the door opens. I won't be able to keep the infected out for long."

"Okay." Her voice cracked with fear, but she was steady enough.

The elevator stopped. I drew a sharp breath and braced myself.

The doors slid silently apart.

The girl lunged for the button and pressed it over and over.

There were people in the hall—men dressed in khakis. They didn't move. Their eyes showed their fright.

They didn't look infected.

They held what looked like wooden training rifles by the barrels over their heads, ready to swing.

Nobody moved. None of us knew what to do. We all had clearly expected something different when the doors opened.

The elevator dinged again and the doors started to close.

"Hey!" one of the guys said.

I pulled the pistol back by my chest, stuffed the extra magazine into my pocket, then put my hand out to stop the elevator doors. "Hey," I replied, flatly.

"Hey," another one said.

"Say something else," I commanded. "I need to know you're not infected."

"We're not infected," the guy directly in front of me said. "You look like you are."

All the guys tensed. Their toy rifles inched menacingly higher.

"Back off, fucktards! My gun is real."

"He's fine," the girl told them. "He saved me from...from them."

From the hall to the left of the elevator a hand reached around and grabbed my wrist.

A big guy next to the talker lurched toward me, raising his wooden rifle to strike.

I fired a deafening round into the wall beside the big guy. Everybody froze.

"If you don't get your hand off my wrist, I'm going to shoot your fucking arm off."

The hand released and disappeared around the corner.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked.

The talker said, "You're infected."

"I'm not," I answered.

"When were you bitten?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm immune."

"Nobody is immune," the talker argued. "Your skin is pale. You're bleeding from a bite. You're just not done changing yet."

"There's an epidemiologist from the CDC in the building next door. He can tell you whatever you need to know. But in the meantime, you need to believe that I'm immune because I have a gun to prove it."

"What does the gun prove?" the talker asked.

"It proves I can shoot anybody else who lays a hand on me or tries to hit me with one of those dumbass toy rifles."

"So you're the guy from the building next door who was out picking up the guns this morning?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't the infected attack you?"

I looked down at my bleeding arm. "I told you, I'm immune. They think I'm one of them, most of the time."

The girl chimed in, "Please, you guys. Can't any of you see what's going on outside? The infected are everywhere, killing everyone. Why are we at each other's throats?"

“We have to be sure,” the talker answered. “We have to keep the infected out of the building or we’re not going to get through this.”

I said, “Well your basement is full of them. They chased us up the tunnel.”

“The building is secure,” the talker said.

“Thanks for forgetting the elevator,” I said.

“That’s the only other way out of the basement.”

I said, “If the building’s not secure, we’ll know soon enough. Listen, I don’t want to stand in this elevator all day. If you guys will back off, I’ll be happy to go and wait by a door until the infected calm down outside and I can leave.”

The talker told his four companions to lower their wooden rifles. “My name is Mark. I’m second in command here.”

“Second in command?”

“We’re ROTC.”

“Oh.”

Mark said, “Maybe we can help each other out.”

“Now you want to be friends?” I asked.

“Why don’t you come see our CO, and we’ll talk about it?”

I was apprehensive. Moments before, they were raring to bash my head in with their wooden guns.

Mark said, “You two can come out of the elevator. We won’t hurt you. The building is safe.”

I looked at the girl. She seemed willing. I lowered the gun, but didn’t put it away. We stepped out of the elevator, but being surrounded by uniformed men—who just moments before were hostile—made me very nervous.

Mark looked at the big guy beside him. “Tom, would you secure the elevator?”

Tom stepped into the elevator.

“How many of you are there?” I asked.

“Us five and our CO. I’ll take you to meet him.”

## Chapter 22

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The CO was a retired military man with thinning hair, an expanding waistline, puffy cheeks, and a permanent scowl. We met him in a large storage room on the second floor that had long windows overlooking the plaza and the gym.

Mark saluted the CO when we came into the room. The CO returned his salute. Mark said, "Major Wilkins, these two entered the building through the utility tunnels and came up through the elevator."

Wilkins asked, "Is the elevator secure now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." The major turned his attention to me, "And you are?"

"Zed Zane." I didn't extend my hand to shake since I still held the pistol.

The major looked to the girl.

"Felicity Bingham. I have friends in a dorm and...and we need help."

Felicity was on the emotional edge. I expected her to burst into tears at any moment, but gave her kudos for keeping it together during our escape.

"We'll get to that," Wilkins said. He turned to me. "I saw what you did for Felicity out there, Mr. Zane. That was brave."

Not comfortable taking the compliment, I shrugged.

Wilkins said, "You can holster your weapon. You're safe in here."

I shook my head. "Thanks for letting us in, I guess, but I think I'll just hold it for now."

"Why?" Wilkins asked, pointedly.

I gestured to the windows. "You've seen the infected. There are a lot of them."

"They're not in here," Wilkins countered.

"Not yet," I argued.

"You're in no danger here," Wilkins said.

"Your guys nearly attacked me coming out of the elevator."

"When was the last time you looked in a mirror? You look like one of the infected."

I looked down at myself. My skin had grown paler since I last checked. My arm was bleeding from another bite wound. I had blood and brain splattered on my shirt from when I shot the infected guy in the tunnel.

I looked back at Wilkins and shrugged. "I clean up nicely, though."

Wilkins ignored that. "Let's get right to it then. Are you infected?"

Yes, was the visible truth of it, but I had no desire to back away from my more complex version of the truth. "I'm immune."

"Immune?" Wilkins said it slowly as though he'd just busted me stealing cookies from the jar on the counter.

"Immune," I confirmed.

"When did you get bit?"

"About ten minutes ago in the tunnel."

"The utility tunnel?"

"Yeah."

Wilkins looked hard at my forearm. "What about the other bite?"

"On Sunday."

"This past Sunday?"

"Yep."

"You were bitten four days ago?"

I nodded.

"I'm assuming you're not naturally an albino."

"Where are you going with this, Wilkins? You can see I'm not albino. I have color in my skin, just not the normal amount. You can see I have a normal hair color."

"But you got infected and you turned this way."

"What do you mean, turned?"

"Turned into one of them," Wilkins said.

"I think I'm still me."

"You don't seem crazed like the other infected," Wilkins conceded.

"I told you I'm immune."

"Maybe you just haven't finished turning yet. There doesn't seem to be any standard time for the infection to take over."

"Look, there's a guy from the CDC who's holed up with me in the building next door. He says I won't turn. He says I'm a slow burn."

"A slow burn? What's that?"

"Something about body temperature or something. Look, I'm fine." I looked down at my ashen skin. "I'm just a little different now."

"And the other infected, they won't bother you."

"I went over this with Mark."

Wilkins stared me down.

I held up my arm. "They don't like my flavor but they're not very bright. They make mistakes."

"So that's why you were able to go out and strip the guns off of those dead soldiers?"

"Hey, that wasn't you guys who shot at me last night, was it?" Anger rose in my voice.

Wilkins shook his head and patted his sidearm. "This is the only firearm we have. I'm not going to waste my ammo on a scavenger."

"Yeah, well fuck you too. You can call me a scavenger or whatever, but you see what it's like out there. We needed guns and I risked my life to get them."

"I thought the infected didn't like your flavor."

"Wilkins, if you've been looking out the window, then you see what happens every time I go out there. I damn near get killed."

Wilkins paused before altering course, "How many guns did you pick up altogether?"

"I'm not sure." I wasn't ready to give that information away.

Wilkins pushed on, "How many of you are over there?"

"What are you getting at?"

Wilkins took a deep breath, stood, and walked over to the window. "You've seen the news. You know what's going on out there."

I shook my head. "No, I haven't seen the news. I don't know shit. I know less than shit. All I know is that my stepdad went nuts, killed my mom, and bit me in the arm. I passed out for two days with a fever, and got arrested by some stupid police who thought I killed everybody. I got out of the jail during the riot..."

"The jail riot? You were in that?"

I brushed past that, "So my friend and I made our way to the hospital, and instead of treating us, the Army tossed us over there in the gym with all of the infected. And now, the infected are running around everywhere killing everybody. Oh, and the CDC guy says it's some incurable disease out of Somalia. There, that's it. That's all I know. Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

Wilkins nodded, "You're lucky to be alive."

"Ya think?"

Wilkins softened, "Are you guys thirsty, hungry?"

The change in direction threw me off. I nodded.

Felicity said, "Yes, both."

Wilkins turned to the cadet who'd come in with us and Mark. "Dawkins, get some sodas and some chips or something."

"Vending machine food?" I asked.

"The same thing you have next door, I guess."

"Yep."

Wilkins walked over to a chair that gave him a view out the window. "Why don't you two pull up a chair? I'll fill you in. Felicity, I'm assuming you're not with him. At least you weren't until you came running across the street."

Felicity and I each took a seat.

Felicity shook her head, "No, I'm with some girls in Blanton. There were four of us."

"Blanton?" Wilkins asked, "That dorm is on the other side of campus. How'd you get over here?"

"My friend Margaret and I went downstairs to raid a vending machine for some food and..."

"And?" Wilkins asked.

"We thought we were being quiet. We didn't know anyone else was down on the first floor."

"There were infected there?" Wilkins asked.

Felicity nodded. "A bunch were right there in the building, on the first floor, and we didn't even know it."

"So you ran?"

"I couldn't get back to the room," Felicity said quietly, her eyes drifting into a stare. "They caught Margaret but I just kept running. I didn't go back to help her."

"You couldn't have helped her," Wilkins told her. "If you'd gone back, you'd be dead too."

Felicity nodded. "I just ran and ran. I couldn't get away until Zed started shooting at them."

"And your other friends, are they still in Blanton?"

"I guess. They were there when I left."

Wilkins nodded. "Do you guys have an internet connection and cable TV? Is everything still operating?"

Felicity nodded.

"So you know what's going on?" Wilkins asked.

Felicity nodded again.

Wilkins leaned forward and put a comforting hand on Felicity's knee. Suddenly, he seemed more like a father than a major with a stick up his ass. "Felicity, I don't know if we can help your friends right now, but I'm sure they're being smart and sitting tight in their dorm room, just like we're sitting tight here. Why don't you go with Mark? He's got a connection on his laptop. Why don't you see if you can contact them and let them know you're all right and then we'll see what we can do?"

Felicity said, "I have my cell phone."

Wilkins said, "But you probably don't have a charger with you."

Felicity shook her head.

"I have the same problem with mine. Why don't you conserve your battery and try the laptop. Mark has it plugged in."

Felicity nodded and stood to leave the room with Mark.

Dawkins returned with cold sodas and packaged cupcakes. He handed me one of each.

"Thanks," I told him.

Dawkins went over to stand by the door.



Without making a show of it, I slipped my pistol into its holster. I asked, "So what's the story? What's happening?"

Wilkins got a distant look on his face. "The infection came out of Africa about six weeks ago. Nobody really knew what it was at the time. But wait, let me preface what I know with this—we're getting all of our information off of the cable news channels and the internet, so take everything with a grain of salt. Half of what we know is probably speculation."

"I hear you," I said. "Some things never change."

Wilkins smiled and nodded. "The disease came up out of Africa. Nobody knew what it was at first. By the time that we started getting brief mentions on the news over here, there were already tens of thousands of infected in Africa, but your CDC man probably told you that."

"He knew quite a bit about Africa, but we don't know much of anything about how things are now."

"So you didn't hear about China or Europe?"

"Major, let's just pretend I don't know anything and go from there."

Wilkins nodded. "China has been establishing a big presence in Africa for the past five or ten years, so they had a lot of people there. Once things got out of hand in Africa, China pulled their people. Some other countries did as well. Americans trickled out slowly because there isn't any central authority with the power to make them all leave, but the smart ones got out. Or at least it was smart for them, but bad for the rest of us."

"China, with a sudden influx of people from Africa, suddenly had thousands of the infected on their hands. So while our news outlets were foaming at the mouth with stories about minor outbreaks in Europe, this thing was already running amok in Asia. Things got out of hand real fast."

"Out of hand?" I asked.

"Nobody has heard a word out of China since last weekend, about the time the infection broke out here."

"How long did all of that take in China?"

"They pulled their people from Africa about four weeks ago. Two weeks later, the internet lit up with videos and pictures of the infected. The rest of the Far East followed suit. That was two weeks ago. Now China is a black hole."

"A black hole?" I asked.

"No television. No reporters. Very little internet traffic. It just died out. Other governments lost contact with their government."

I shook my head. "Is that what's happening here?"

Wilkins nodded. "Here in Austin last weekend, Dallas and San Antonio by Monday. It started in Houston on Tuesday. Some east coast cities, and now it's all over the country."

I asked, "But we're a modern country. Most of China is third world. Surely we have the infrastructure in place to handle something like this?"

"I don't know. I'd like to think that we're more capable, but from what I've seen on the news, it looks like things are going to get very, very ugly."

"End of the world?" I asked, expecting him disabuse me of the notion.

Wilkins nodded.

Crap.

## Chapter 23

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"The people you're with, how do they feel about you being infected?" Wilkins asked.

"They don't care."

"You must have some very understanding friends, Zed."

I shook my head. "I don't know them that well. I just met them."

"Really?" Wilkins paused. "In the gym?"

I nodded. "Sure."

"They were infected too?"

I nodded again.

"Were there a lot like you in the gym? Immune?"

I shook my head. "We were the only three, and I'm not sure about one of us."

"So there are just three of you?"

"You know we're armed." I said.

"Zed, that's not why I'm asking. We mean you no harm. The cadets didn't intend to threaten you when the elevator door opened. It's just that we all have to be more careful now. You understand that, don't you?"

I nodded.

"I watched you through the window, Zed. You picked up a lot of weapons for just three guys."

"We were planning for the worst."

"Zed, what can I do to talk you out of some of those weapons?"

Honestly, I'd have just given him some if he'd asked. They were just people like me, trying not to get killed. But since he was offering, "What do you know about the rifles that the soldiers were carrying?"

"It's the standard weapon. It's a military issue M-4."

"Shows you what I know. I was guessing an AR-15."

"Same thing, Zed. One is for civilian use, the other, military."

"Ah, well, I don't know anything about how to use or take care of one."

"You looked like you handled it pretty well out in the quad, when you were shooting the infected."

"Well, as long as nothing goes wrong, I'm good. But like I said, I don't know anything about taking care of a gun unless it shoots paintballs."

"You're a paintball player?"

"Yeah," I nodded.

"So is my son."

"It's a lot of fun."

"Yep. I hope he's okay."

"Is he here in town?" I asked.

"No. He's in the Army, stationed up at Fort Hood."

I didn't know whether to offer encouragement or condolences. "Look, we've got more guns than we need right now. We can spare at least one M-4, and I may be able to go out and pick up those other guns. I mean, my luck has got to get better than it's been. If you'll show me how to handle one of these properly and how to take care of it, we'll call it even."

"That sounds good. How are you guys set for food?" Wilkins asked.

"Same as you, I imagine. We had eight vending machines and they all seem stocked—at least the ones I broke into."

"We've got four in this building," Wilkins told me.

"But there have got to be at least a thousand spread all over campus."

"You're probably right about that," Wilkins agreed.

"It's not nutritious, but it's a lot of food with a long shelf life. How are you guys set for electronics? We don't have anything."

"I've got a cell phone with half a charge. Mark may have a charger for his. Most of the guys have laptops, but again, only a couple have cords to plug them in."

I nodded. It wasn't great but it was better than nothing.

"Zed, you seem like a good guy to me."

"Okay..."

"I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but we might all be better off if we combine forces, so to speak, and work together."

I nodded. "Sure, we don't have plans past getting through the day. I mean, we talked about some things, but frankly, it's all guesswork. Do you guys want to move in together?" I laughed. "Your place or ours?"

Wilkins thought on that for a few moments. "Getting together in one building would be best. This building isn't defensible—too many windows downstairs. Your building has fewer ground floor windows that we'd need to fortify. We might make do with that until we figure out something better."

"That's fine. We've got plenty of room. We're camped out on the fifth floor. The rooms up there have great views of the surrounding areas and they each have bunks for four."

"That sounds good. Are you sure you're comfortable with us moving in?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm not worried about the elevator thing. The world is going crazy and we're all on edge. Besides Major, you seem like a good guy."

Wilkins asked, "And your CDC man won't mind?"

"I doubt it. He'd welcome the company. I think he's afraid to be by himself."

"Okay. That leaves the girls in Blanton."

I shook my head on that subject. "What are you thinking?"

"I have an idea Zed, but you might not like it."

## Chapter 24

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With a sour look on his face, Mark swung the door open and I walked out into the blazing afternoon heat with a fully-loaded pistol in hand and half a clip to spare. The air still tasted of ash. The ubiquitous traffic noise from the highway was gone. Howls of the infected echoed between the buildings. The sound of distant gunfire popped in the air—the sounds of civilization falling apart.

My feet crunched brown blades of grass as I walked out into the center of the quad. The infected lurking in the shadows of the giant oaks and behind the shady bushes gave me only a passing glance.

I squinted in the harsh light and realized that I needed sunglasses if I was going to function in the daylight hours with permanently dilated pupils.

I turned and looked up at the window on the fifth floor of the dorm where I thought Jerome would be cowering—unless Murphy turned, broke free, and ate him. I waved an arm and watched the dormer window.

Nothing.

I waved again, but got no response. “What a pussy.”

I went about my business of collecting. With a specific prize in mind, I was lucky to find a pair of sunglasses in the pocket of the first dead soldier I came to. Seeing that the infected had no interest in me, I collected two full sets of gear including tactical vests, helmets, and weapons.

On my way back to the ROTC building I angled close by the dormitory to see what I might see.

The click of the mirrored glass door on the side of the dorm startled me. I stopped and looked over. Jerome poked his head out nervously and waved me over.

I looked around to check on the state of the infected in the area. I headed over toward Jerome. I harshly whispered, “What the hell, dude!”

Jerome nodded his head toward the infected and gave me a look that said ‘stay quiet.’ He swung the door open wide for me and quietly pulled it closed behind us.

In the long hallway that ran the length of the building, I laid the equipment on the floor and turned on Jerome. I made no attempt to mask my anger. “Damn it, Jerome, I could have been killed by those infected. You were supposed to open the door. What the hell?”

“Dude, dude. Be cool, man.”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t need to be cool, *man*. What I need to do is beat your ass.”

Jerome stepped back. In a condescending tone, he said, “Don’t go all Neanderthal on me, Zed. Grow up. I did what I had to do.”

“You had to lock me out because you’re a pussy, you mean?”

“Zed, if I had let you in with a hundred infected chasing you and hundreds more coming up the street, how long do you think that door would have held once they saw

you come through it?”

I didn't answer. My rage had bubbled to the surface and my brain, impaired by anger, was in no mood to hear reason.

“Think about it, man.”

I huffed and picked the gear up off the floor just to keep my fists from balling up and beating Jerome.

“You know I'm right. They would have come in here and killed you, me, Murphy, and that girl. And then where would you be?”

I held up my freshly bitten and still oozing forearm for Jerome to see. “They wouldn't have killed us. They don't seem to like our flavor.”

“But one bit you anyway.”

“Duh!”

“Don't you see, Zed?”

“See what?”

“Just because they don't want to eat us doesn't mean they won't injure us if they're in an excited state. They might even kill us.”

I headed toward the elevator.

“By the way, what happened to the girl?” Jerome asked.

“She's fine. She's in the building next door.”

As we rode the elevator up, I quickly related what had transpired. We were standing in the hall on the fifth floor when I finished.

Jerome said, “That's not a good idea.”

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“I don't think it's a good idea to have them here. We don't know these guys.”

“Jerome, twenty-four hours ago, I didn't know you. Forty-eight hours ago, I didn't know Murphy.”

“That's not what I'm trying to say, Zed. They're not like us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Infected.”

I shook my head. “Jerome, I talked to them. We're cool. They know what the deal is. They know we're fine. Speaking of which, how's Murphy?”

“This is a bad idea.” We reached the door of our commandeered room. “Murphy started coming around about a half hour ago.”

“And?” I asked.

“And I think he's going to be like us, a slow burner.”

I nodded and went in.

Murphy was sitting on the bed guzzling a sports drink. His cuffs were off.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Like crap," Murphy answered.

"It gets better," I offered. "Drink lots of liquids. Eat what you can. By this time tomorrow, you'll be back to normal, or at least as normal as you're ever going to be again."

Murphy made a show of looking down at the light-colored skin on his arms. He shook his head. "Are you saying I'm staying this color?"

Jerome answered, "Yes. Just be happy you didn't turn into one of the cannibals."

"Cannibals?" Murphy asked.

"You've missed a lot while you were out, Murphy."

"How long have I been out?" Murphy asked.

I turned to Jerome. "Why don't you fill Murphy in? I'm going to get the people from next door."

"Zed, I still think it's a bad idea."

"I know, but it's a done deal, so let's be big boys and deal with it."

I picked up a couple of M-4s that were leaning against the wall, booty from my earlier trip outside. "Jerome, are these loaded?"

He nodded.

"I'll take these two with me. Are those clips full?"

"The ones on the left are. The ones on the right are empty."

"Thanks." I scooped up a few clips.

"Zed, I know you're mad, but you did the right thing, helping that girl. That was heroic."

It was hard, really hard but I said, "You did too, Jerome. If you'd opened the door, we'd probably all have been killed."

"What are you guys taking about?" Murphy asked.

"He'll tell you." I headed downstairs.

The dormitory and the ROTC building were rectangular buildings, erected in line with one another. They formed the southern boundary of the east mall, which lay on the opposite side of the buildings from the quad and Gregory Gym. Because of that, the door at the east end of the dorm fed directly into the door at the western end of the ROTC building with a mere twenty feet of sidewalk in between.

As Major Wilkins and I had arranged, his group was waiting at the western door of the ROTC building when I got to the dormitory's eastern door. I leaned the extra M-4s against the wall just inside the door and checked the gap between the buildings for lingering infected. I saw that it was clear, and swung the door open. I held the door wide and stepped out as far as I could into the gap. I saw infected in the distance, but there were no nearby threats.

I raised a finger to my lips to indicate quiet and waved Wilkins' group across.



Moments later, Wilkins, Felicity, and the five ROTC guys were in the dorm—with the door closing behind—each exhaling breath they probably hadn't realized they were holding.

Two of the ROTC guys, Mark and Tom, wasted no time in taking ownership of the weapons I'd leaned against the wall.

I said, "There's more ammunition upstairs. We don't have enough weapons for everyone, but there are a lot more outside."

"Thanks," Wilkins said, reaching out to shake my hand.

I reached out and noticed Mark flinch as I grabbed Wilkins' hand. There was no blood on my hand, nor any gory bits.

Mark's reaction rattled me. Something wasn't right.

Wilkins fished a pair of car keys out of his pocket and handed them to me. "I can go with you," he said.

"I can go outside, because I'm infected," I said bluntly. "If you go out, the infected will come after you and we won't stand a chance. Thanks for offering though."

Wilkins silently agreed.

Felicity jumped between us and threw her arms around me. "Thank you! Thank you so much."

I shrugged as she let go. "Thank me when I get back with your friends," I said.

She pulled out her cell phone and gave it to me. "Remember, call Amber. She's on my favorites list, the first one."

"Okay."

"They know I'm coming and they're ready to go, right?"

"Yes," Felicity confirmed.

"And your phone has enough of a charge?" I asked.

"About half a charge, but that should be more than enough."

"Yeah, okay." I looked everyone over. "Jerome is up on the fifth floor. He knows you're coming but be sure to say something when you get off the elevator, just in case."

"Will do," Wilkins told me.

With my pistol drawn, I opened the door and went back out into the heat.

## Chapter 25

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With a callousness that should never have grown so quickly, I walked among the scattered remains of the soldiers, picked out another M-4, and morbidly restocked my ammunition supply. An extra pistol seemed like a good idea, but I cut off my shopping trip there, not wanting to burden myself unduly for when I'd next have to run for my life.

A faculty parking lot lay two blocks over, just as Wilkins had told me. Among the half-dozen cars, I easily spotted his gray sedan. As I approached the vehicle, I clicked the remote once to unlock the driver's side door. The car responded with a chirp and a flash of the parking lights.

Oops!

I looked around quickly as I realized that it would most likely be some old habit from a different world that would eventually get me killed.

A half-dozen infected were looking at or already running toward the car.

I ran the last twenty feet, flung the driver's door open, tossed in the M-4, followed it in, and slammed the door shut just as two infected pounced on the car. One landed on the hood and immediately started to beat on the windshield with his fist. The other tried to press his face through the glass on the passenger side window.

"Stupid!" Adrenaline shook my hands as I found the ignition key and started the engine.

The sound of the relatively quiet engine was enough to send the infected into a frenzy. The car bounced as two more infected bodies slammed into its side. The windshield cracked under the persistent fist of the infected on the hood.

I shoved the car into reverse and spun the wheels as I backed out. I ran over a soft bump and counted one infected dead. With the crazy infected clawing at the glass all around, I backed into a parked pickup I didn't see. I shifted the transmission, punched the accelerator to the floor, and the front-wheel drive pulled the car hard right, into two more infected. They rolled off the hood as I raced toward the exit. I swerved hard to make the turn, and the infected on my hood slipped away and skittered across the asphalt.

I raced out onto the street and caught another infected with the passenger side bumper, breaking out the headlight. I checked the rearview mirror. A dozen infected were running up the street in full speed pursuit.

When I hit forty, I figured I'd better dodge as many infected as I could, lest I damage the car's radiator with an impact. They were everywhere—coming out into the street and onto the sidewalks, out on the expansive lawns, from the gardens and fountains. As I passed, every single head snapped in my direction. Every one of the infected flowed into the street after me.

Good God, there were thousands.

I pushed the car to sixty as another one of the infected glanced off the passenger side of the vehicle.

I smashed the brakes hard and rubber screamed on the asphalt as the car floated into a left turn. I spun the car out on a broad boulevard near the northern edge of the campus and headed west.

I regained control and accelerated toward a wide pedestrian bridge that linked the main campus with the buildings to the north. I saw a hundred heads pop up above the rail as I rolled under. Just as the echo of the engine bounced back to me off of the concrete all around, I saw the dark silhouette of a body fall in front of me from the walkway above.

I braked and swerved as two more bodies fell. I hit one with the bumper just as the car jarred under the double impact of one on the hood and another on the roof. The windshield shattered into a translucent web.

My foot found the accelerator again and the infected rolled off, but I was nearly blind and speeding west.

I looked to my left and right to gauge my position in the road, and to judge how much further I needed to go. I prayed nothing lay in the street ahead.

The car lurched from another impact. A body smashed partially through the windshield with a crunch of bones and a splatter of blood. The girl stuck in the windshield had done me the favor of knocking out enough of the shattered glass for me to see ahead.

I spied a street to the left and cut the wheels hard, skidding loudly. I sideswiped a parked car and drew the attention of a few infected up the street, who immediately came at me.

I checked the rearview mirror. At least a hundred frenzied infected were rounding the corner behind me.

The car wasn't going to last much longer. I needed to stop and get away from it as fast as possible, or the infected would shred me in their frenzy before they realized that I wasn't tasty.

I aimed the car at a sharp right-hand corner ahead. Past caring about damage to the car, I ran down two more infected and watched parts of the bumper and parts of bodies fly past.

I slammed the brakes as I rounded the curve, and angled toward another parked car.

The collision was painfully loud. The airbag deployed and slapped my face hard enough to bloody my nose. The horn sounded and didn't stop.

I tried the door but it was jammed shut. I elbowed out the fractured driver's side window and crawled out as quickly as I could with no thought to cuts and scrapes.

I fell free and hit the asphalt with a slap.

I got my feet beneath me, pulled the pistol, and shot two infected who were only steps away.

Thanks to Wilkins' demonstrably shitty plan, I only had seconds to live unless I put some distance between myself, the bleating car, and the infected mob coming up the street.

A quick glance around told me I might have time to grab the M-4 off of the passenger floorboard and get away. To face the frenzied infected without it was certain death.

I jumped back through the window, scrabbling forward. I got a hand on the M-4, smashed my forehead into the cracked passenger side window, and broke it out as I fell through.

I hit the asphalt and rolled into a somersault that put me back on my feet. I was so surprised that it worked that I almost forgot to move.

I made a beeline for the corner of the nearest building and faced eight infected as soon as I made the turn. They were running toward the sound of the car, but caught a clip full of M-4 rounds for their trouble. I didn't slow down at all.

Two infected came up out of a stairwell to the building's basement just as I passed. I shouldered the first one and tumbled them both down the stairs.

I spied a door just ahead and prayed that it wasn't locked.

Fast feet and adrenaline got me there—I cradled the M-4 in my right arm and pulled the door handle with my left.

It opened.

I stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind me, cutting off the howls of the infected running up the side of the building. I needed a place to hide, and I needed it now.

I ran into a stairwell as the vanguard of the infected horde hit the door. Thankfully, it was another door that opened out, rather than in. Their collective weight held it closed as they struggled to get in, but that would only last for a moment.

I bounded up the stairs and passed two, then three infected. I gasped for air. The first floor door burst open as hundreds of screams filled the stairwell.

I exited the stairwell on three. The hall was empty. Thank God!

Elevator!

If I could get inside, I might be safe.

I ran up the hall and hit the button. The light came on and I waited.

And I waited.

The infected were on the stairs.

"C'mon!"

The infected were close.

The stairwell door slammed open loudly and the infected tripped over each other, spilling into the hall.

The elevator chimed in the nick of time. I stepped inside and pushed the button to close the door.

Safe!

I flipped the emergency switch to lock the elevator to keep it from moving up or down — fell back against the wall, slid down to the floor, and finally breathed.

Two breaths later, the elevator doors reverberated with the impact of bodies smashing into it.

Damn! Persistent fuckers!

Fingers started to squeeze their way between the doors.

I jumped to my feet, unlocked the elevator, and pressed the button for the lowest level in the building. The elevator complied, and took me down to the basement. I reloaded the M-4, leveled it at the door, drew several deep breaths to steady myself, and prepared to run and shoot. The elevator chimed and the door opened. There was nobody there.

I stepped out just as I heard the sound of several pairs of feet running up the hall.

Infected!

I pointed the rifle, but knew that if I pulled the trigger, I would never get out of the building alive.

*The ogre and the harpy.*

It was time to gamble that these guys weren't in the frenzied mob that was following me, but were lingering in the basement and simply attracted by the elevator noise. I stepped back against the wall, lowered my M-4, and drew the pistol.

The infected slowed as they neared me, stopped, looked me over, sniffed me, and realized that I was one of them. They turned their attention to the closing elevator doors.

I drew a deep breath and stepped up next to them. Blending in couldn't hurt.

They spent a full minute searching the elevator for something worth eating. They somehow decided amongst themselves that it was empty, and they followed one another through the open rooms on the basement floor, methodically searching for a live human. I searched with them. With the frenzied mob running through the floors above and howling in frustration, I figured the camouflage of being in the group might keep me safe.

None of the horde ventured into the basement, but it took a half hour before the noise above diminished.

One by one, the infected in my group gave up the search and settled themselves into a shadowy corner of one of the classrooms where they squatted and stared. I watched them for a bit and wondered how long they'd stay there in the absence of a stimulus.

I found an empty classroom as far from the infected in the basement as I could get. I went in and gently closed the door behind me. Calculus formulae and equations waited on the chalkboards for students who would never arrive. Desks sat in neat rows, waiting for years of rust and rot to erase them from the world.

Sunlight shone in from the west through three window wells that also provided me an ankle-level view outside.

I needed to be patient. The car's incessant horn was keeping the infected feet outside hurrying urgently around in search of prey. I'd have to stay hidden until they lost

interest or the battery died.

I took a seat on the floor where I could lean on the instructor's desk and be hidden from any eyes peeking through the door.

I was drenched with sweat. I was thirsty and had an adrenaline hangover. At least the room was cool, the floor was wonderfully cold, and I felt somewhat safe.

It was time to think through the next steps. The original plan of loading up the girls and driving them back was off the table. That bad plan had been based on too many old world assumptions. The tunnels were likely still full of infected from my adventure with Felicity earlier in the day. Sneaking back on my own was an option, but the girls' dormitory lay just across the street.

I needed to think.

The cell phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out. It was Wilkins with a text message.

Wilkins: Zed, are you okay?

Me: I'm ok.

Wilkins: The girls said they heard a car crash.

Me: About that...

Wilkins: ?

Me: The car was an idea that sounded good but wasn't. Your car is toast.

Wilkins: It's wrecked?

Me: The car was like a magnet for the infected. They swarmed it as soon as I opened the door.

Wilkins: But you're okay?

Me: I got lucky, but yes.

Wilkins: Are you still going to try to get the girls, or will you come back?

Me: I don't know.

Wilkins: Where are you?

Me: I'm in a basement classroom in the building across the street from Blanton.

Wilkins: I'll let the girls know you're there.

Me: Tell them to keep quiet. I need some time to figure this out. I'm open to any ideas you guys might have.

I got nothing back for several long minutes.

Wilkins: Nothing on this end. Will keep you posted.

Me: Ok.

I passed an hour in silence, with no ideas from Wilkins.

The shadows were growing long. The infected finally dispersed to wherever they preferred to lurk. I still had no idea how to get the girls back to the rest of the group, but sitting by myself in a basement wasn't going to solve the problem. I texted Amber

to let her know I was on the way, and that I'd knock very softly on their door when I arrived.

## Chapter 26

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Crossing the street was uneventful. Entering Blanton was no problem, as the first door I tried was unlocked. This made sense, since the dorm was in use for the summer session. In the recreation area, I passed at least a dozen infected women—former residents, I guessed—who squatted in a corner and eyed me as I passed by.

I passed the elevator, with its attractive chime, and slipped into a stairwell. I paused and listened. A few floors up, I heard the sound of the infected squabbling over scraps.

I quietly made my way up toward the sound. On the third floor landing, five infected were gnawing at someone's remains—torn clothing, smears of blood, and ragged bones.

The infected snarled, and greedily pushed at me as I waded through. They had no intention of sharing with me.

A fat one squatted in front of the door at the top of the stairs and glared at me. She got irritated as I pushed past, but did nothing to harm me. I tried to close the door behind me, but she had shifted when I opened the door—her girth prevented it from closing.

The hall was empty in both directions. I took a guess and turned right, reading the door numbers as I walked. I arrived at the correct door and softly knocked.

No response.

Give me a break.

I knocked again.

"Who is it?" a voice quietly asked from the other side.

"It's me, Zed," I whispered. I heard noises from the stairwell and turned to my right. Nothing was coming, yet. "Open the door, please."

I heard the working of the lock and then the door opened.

I stepped inside. A girl was behind the door ready to push it shut, but she pressed herself to the wall in fear when her eyes fell on me. A girl over by the window threw her hands over her mouth and screamed in wide-eyed terror.

"Damn it! Quiet!" I pushed the door shut, but heard a wail and the sounds of running footsteps coming up the hall.

The infected!

I turned to the girl. "What was that for?"

"I thought...I thought you were one of them."

"Damn it. Does every fucking thing have to go wrong? Felicity should have told you about me. You two, get back."

The girls moved over by the window. I stood in the center of the room and leveled my M-4 at the door, but I already knew that was a bad idea. Gunfire would draw every one of the crazy bastards from blocks around.



My mind raced for an escape plan but before the slightest inkling of a thought could gel, the door shook under the assault of a heavy body running at it. Fists pounded. The doorknob jiggled. The infected wailed and then the door flexed.

“Shit!” Maybe I shouldn’t have said that aloud. “Have either of you used a gun before?”

The screamer nodded. The other shook her head.

“It’s easy. Point and pull the trigger. But be careful and don’t shoot me.” I handed them each a pistol. “The safety is off.”

“Let’s block the door,” the screamer said.

D’oh! Good idea. “Is that desk bolted down?” I asked.

“It moves,” the screamer told me.

“Great. Help me get it to the door.”

As fast as we could, we stacked the bulky desks in front of the door as it rattled in its frame.

I leaned into the wooden desks, adding my strength to the weight. I felt each blow to the door as the wood conveyed the vibration of each fist blow and headlong rush. The girls found every heavy object in the room and stacked them in and on the desks, adding to the dead weight supporting the door against the assault.

With everything moved, the screamer took a position beside me and leaned into the desk. “Will they go away?” she whispered.

I nodded. I hoped.

## Chapter 27

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Over the course of an hour, the beating on the door dissipated, then ceased. The girls and I silently maintained our positions, holding the desks against the wall for a good while past when we heard the last of the noises disappear.

Finally, we relaxed. I sat on the floor with my back to the desk. Each girl sat on a bed, exhausted, fearful, and hopeless.

No words were spoken between us. The hour-long assault taught us the value of silence when we didn't know how close the nearest ears might be.

I reached into my pocket for the incessantly buzzing cell phone and handed it to one of the girls. Worried, the others had sent dozens of text messages. In the absence of a response, Felicity probably feared that her friends and I were dead. I'd leave it to the girls to sort it all out.

One of the girls put a hand to her mouth and pantomimed drinking something from a bottle. She pointed at me with a question on her face.

I looked around the room. There were empty water bottles and soda cans on the floor, but nothing that looked like it held any liquid. They didn't have anything and I didn't bring anything with me. My past life presumption on the ubiquity of clean water just got killed. I needed to stop learning things the hard way.

I shook my head.

One of the girls, the dark haired screamer, picked up a notepad and pen. She wrote on it and showed it to me.

Amber.

She pointed to herself.

I nodded.

She wrote another name and showed it to me and pointed to the blonde.

Marcy.

I nodded and smiled.

Amber handed the pad and pen to me.

I wrote my name and showed it to them. Didn't they already know?

Amber took the pad, drew a large question mark and showed it to me.

I shrugged. She got a determined look on her face, but Marcy deflated and sagged against the wall. I thought she might cry.

I closed my eyes and let my head down into my hands, resting my elbows on my knees.

I needed to think.

I heard the very faint taps on the screen of the cellphone as Amber communicated with the other group.

The other dorm was probably three quarters of mile to a mile diagonally across campus. That distance was swarming with infected, all with apparently endless appetites and irritating persistence.

Options again?

Save my own ass and leave the girls? No.

A car? No fucking way.

The tunnels? A gamble with bad odds and no sure escape if things went sour.

I was stuck ruminating on those three options. There had to be others.

The last light of dusk faded slowly from the sky and another hour ticked past. Darkness and shadows from the streetlights were all I could see through the leaves of the oak trees outside the window. I thought about whether the darkness would offer us any advantage in an escape. I knew I couldn't see any better in the dark, and I didn't imagine the other infected could either. We all still had the same human physiology we'd had before the disease struck. They had diminished brain capacity. We all had less pigment and dilated pupils. Oh, and one other thing I was coming to suspect—sensations of pain seemed to be all but gone. I felt everything just as I had before, but things that should have hurt so much that I'd normally cry out in pain, didn't. The painful part of sensation was gone. I'd need to ask Jerome about that.

An idea came to me but I needed to risk a conversation with the girls.

I scooted up on the floor and we all leaned in close together.

I bent forward and whispered, "So you guys texted Felicity, right?"

Amber and Marcy nodded.

"So you know the deal, then." I looked at each until they nodded. "I have an idea to get us out of here so that we can join the others. Is that what you want to do?"

Marcy nodded.

Amber said, "If we stay here alone, it's only a matter of time before..."

She was right about that; the fate that she couldn't bring herself to speak. They would both die.

"I'll be honest," I said. "I don't know that we'll make it all the way across campus."

Mary asked, "You think we might get stuck somewhere?"

"No, we might get killed."

"Killed?"

"Yes." I didn't want to paint a rosy picture for them. They needed to know the honest reality in order to make their own choices. I didn't want to carry the burden of a lie along with the burden of their deaths, if it came to that. "I think there's very little chance that you'll make it there alive."

"But we have guns," Marcy countered.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "There are too many of them. If we have to shoot, we'll kill a few, but every infected on campus will come running. There are thousands."

Marcy deflated and stared down at the nearly useless pistol. Fifteen rounds in a Glock would do little more than delay your death with a hundred infected coming at you. Guns were no solution when dealing with the infected. They were a means to buy time and distance. Those were the things that could save your life. Guns bought time. Time bought distance. The only way for a normal not to get killed by the infected was to not be near them.

Amber asked, "If we stay, how long do you think it'll be before someone comes to rescue us?"

I shook my head, "I don't know. You probably know better than me. All I know is what Wilkins told me. I haven't seen any news since, like, Saturday."

Marcy hissed, "Amber, nobody's coming. You've seen the news." She dismissively pointed at me. "This is it."

"Thanks." *Bitch.*

Marcy interpreted my tone. "I didn't mean it like that."

I shrugged. "Yeah, whatever."

Amber stepped in, "She didn't mean it like that, Zed. We've just been stuck in here for two days. We look out the window and we see what's going on. We've been online; we know what's going on everywhere. Marcy hasn't been able to get her parents on the phone since Monday. My dad tried to drive in from Lubbock to get me, but he can't get past the roadblocks around Abilene. We've lost our friends. We're tired. We're hungry. We're thirsty, and we're scared." Tears filled her eyes.

I looked down at the floor. I felt bad. I wasn't emotionally attached to the ones I'd lost, and as long as my temperature didn't continue to rise, at least I had a good chance at remaining alive. For the girls, however, the losses were real, and death loomed large.

"Look, I don't mean to be a dick," I said. "It just kind of happens by itself. Marcy, can you pop open your laptop and pull up a campus map? I have an idea that might work. It might take us all night to get to the other side of campus, but if we're careful, I think it can work."

With the map in front of us, I explained my plan and was rewarded with a tiny spark of hope in their eyes. I told them to pack up their backpacks.

Marcy said, "I don't even know what to take."

"Whatever you'll need for the rest of your life," I told them with a straight face, then smiled.

Marcy smiled and rolled her eyes. Amber suppressed a laugh.

In a tense situation, any joke will do.

"I don't know anything about all this end of the world stuff, but if I were you, I'd wear the most rugged shoes I could find. Wear some jeans. Bring some socks and undies, maybe an extra shirt. Bring your computer and charger if you want. Don't bring more than you can run with. If there's one thing I've learned in the last few days, it's that you'll have to run."

"Why do we need our computers?" Amber asked.

“As long as we have electricity and an internet connection, they’ll come in real handy.”

Both girls nodded.

“Okay, let’s get these desks moved as quietly as possible.”

Moving everything quietly took a while. When we finished, I very slowly opened the door and peeked out. The hall was empty. I looked to the girls for final confirmation. They nodded.

I headed to the north end of the building. The girls closed the door behind.

I walked as quietly as I could up the hall. I heard no sounds from any lingering infected, but every shadow I passed made me nervous.

At the end of the hall, I slipped into the stairwell and stopped on the landing to listen. No sound came up from below.

I made my way down to the first floor and out into the hall. Just outside the stairwell, the girls told me there was a public restroom. I entered and closed door silently behind me. I methodically checked each stall to ensure it was empty. The window on the exterior wall had been replaced by translucent glass block. That was good.

On the way out, I checked the door, and indeed, there was a deadbolt lock that could be set from the inside. That was a piece of luck. I closed the door and went back upstairs. From the hall, I texted the girls. A moment later, they opened the door and let me in.

“The bathroom at the bottom of the stairs is clear. The way there is clear. If we go quietly, we can make it.”

Amber nodded. Marcy’s fear was getting the best of her. She stared through me.

“If you want to back out, now is the time.”

“No, we need to go,” said Amber. “It’s our only chance.”

“Okay,” I said. “Remember—quiet.”

It took several tense minutes, but we made it down the hall, down the stairs, and into the restroom. I locked the door as we stepped in, then rechecked each stall to ensure that it hadn’t become occupied during my short absence.

“Okay,” I whispered to the girls. “Are we good?”

Moving was doing Marcy good. Amber nervously smiled.

“The entrance to the bio-chem building is just across the street from the door at the bottom of the stairwell. I’m going to head across and find us a room there on the first floor. I’ll be back. Keep the door locked while I’m gone. If the infected come, remember, stay quiet. Keep the door shut. I’ll find a place to hide close by until they wander off. If all goes to shit, then I’ll just shoot them all and we’ll run back up the room and hope for the best.”

Amber said, “Go ahead. We’re good.”

“Yes,” Marcy agreed.

I left the restroom and crept out across the street and into the bio-chem building. I found our next leap-frog room there on the second floor, just a short distance inside

the building. The first floor wasn't an option. Many infected were silently squatting in the hall up at the other end of the building.

In that fashion, we very slowly worked our way across campus, staying mostly inside, sometimes traversing the length of a building on the first floor, sometimes on the second, and sometimes on the third or fourth.

Thankfully, the school was in a summer session. During the regular semester, there would have been ten times as many students around, hence ten times as many infected in the buildings. As it was, I suspected that many of the infected outdoors had wandered onto the campus from the surrounding city.

It took hours, but we arrived at the last outdoor space we had to cross—the street near where Felicity had run earlier that day. Unlike Felicity's crossing, ours was uneventful. The door on the western end of the dormitory opened as we approached.

We'd made it.

## Chapter 28

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I stirred when the sun came up and the room got warm, but I pulled my pillow up over my head and extended the darkness.

Later in the morning, voices crept through, but I kept my eyes closed tight and sleep came again.

When I finally did roll over and surrender to the strident sunshine, it was close to ten in the morning. I was alone in the room. I stared at the bunk above me, listening to the morning sounds coming in through the windows and thinking about the previous day's events. The breeze disturbed the window blinds. Grackles annoyed one another in the branches of the ancient oaks. A squirrel chattered a warning. Occasional gunshots in the background were starting to seem ordinary.

The door opened and I tilted my head to see Jerome come into the room. He looked worried.

"Hey," I said.

"You're up?"

He came over and sat in the desk chair nearest my bunk. He took a long look out the window at nothing, then said, "The ROTC guys don't like me."

"Jerome, I don't think junior high social concerns are at the top of the list of things we have to worry about."

"You say that now, but they don't like you either."

"Big deal." I rolled over on my side then sat up.

"Zed, they're afraid of us. That Mark guy said we're an abomination in the face of God."

That took me by surprise. "Did God tell him that?"

Jerome ignored that. "They think that because we're infected, we're a danger to them."

"That doesn't make any sense. Did you tell them that they didn't have to worry?"

"Of course, I did."

"And they didn't believe you?"

Jerome shook his head.

"Why not? You're from the CDC, if anybody knows what's going on, it's you."

Jerome stared at the floor. "Yeah, well, that's just it."

"What's just it?" I asked.

More staring. More waiting. "You're going to find out soon enough, so I might as well tell you."

"Okay," I prompted.

"All that stuff I told you about the infection—I learned most of that on the internet."

I swung my feet onto the floor and leaned forward, my interest piqued. "So, are you saying that the CDC didn't send you to Africa?"

Jerome shook his head.

"So, you didn't have any real experience with the infection when the CDC sent you to Austin."

Jerome took a moment to respond. "The CDC didn't send me to Austin."

"So what, you just left Atlanta and came here on your own?"

"Zed, I've never been to Atlanta."

"What? What are you saying, Jerome?"

"Zed," Jerome sighed and looked out the window. "I don't work for the CDC."

I was taken aback. "But..."

"I own a sub shop over on Guadalupe Street."

"You own a sub shop across the street from campus?"

Jerome nodded.

My temper flared. I wanted to punch him in the face. I wanted to punch him in the face a bunch of times. I jumped up from the bed and he flinched away. I paced around the room and drew several angry breaths. "Why are you telling me this now, Jerome? I already bought your line of bullshit about the CDC."

Jerome stared out the window but didn't answer.

"Well?" I prodded.

"Because those ROTC guys—Tom and Mark—they used to come into my shop all the time. They recognized me."

"So, you're just a lying pussy. That's the bottom line here, right? You made up all that shit so that I'd get you out of the gym, so I'd take all the risks while you sat up here in the room all safe and sissy-like, too valuable to go outside."

"It's not like that."

My fists were clenched. My voice was harsh. "I don't see how it couldn't be like that. But hey, why don't you fuckin' tell me what it's like, Jerome?"

Jerome didn't.

"Well?" I demanded.

No reply.

"You fucker," I muttered. I grabbed a warm can of soda and a package of plastic-wrapped something-or-other off of the stack on the desk and headed for the door.

In a weak voice, Jerome said, "Zed, I'm sorry."

I ignored him and slammed the door shut on my way out of the room.

Wilkins was coming up the hall just in front of me. "Mad?" he asked.

"God damn Jerome," I groused.



"I guess you found out he's not with the CDC."

"Yep." I stomped down the hall. Jerome had literally sent me out among the infected, based on something he'd read on the internet. What really bothered me though, was the question of my prognosis. Was I going to turn? Was I going to become a mindless zombie, squatting in the shadows until a normal with a gun put me down?

I stomped into the common area with a scowl on my face. Murphy was sitting on a couch, chatting up Amber and Felicity, back to his loquacious self. The only difference from the time I first saw him was that he was a much paler brown than before.

"Thank you, thank you so much," Amber told me as I walked up. "You saved our lives."

I shrugged. It wasn't nothing, but what else was I going to do? "Anybody would have done it."

"Not Jerome," said Felicity.

Murphy laughed heartily at that. "Man, I would have come with, but I was passed out from the infection."

"Yeah," I agreed and sat down on the couch. I opened my tiny donuts and cola. "Where is everybody?"

"They're downstairs, fortifying the windows, I think," Felicity said.

"With what?" I asked.

"I don't know," she answered.

"I guess it doesn't matter. It needs to be done."

Murphy spoke up, "Wilkins wants everybody to meet at three o'clock to talk about our situation."

"Wilkins does?" I asked, unnecessarily.

"Yep. He's in charge, right?" Murphy asked.

I looked around. "Nobody told me."

Amber shook her head and raised her palms. "We're new."

"We're all new," I told them. "Did you guys eat already?"

"Vending machine food never tasted so good," Amber said.

"It's going to get old in a hurry," said Murphy.

We all agreed, then ran out of words. I started eating. Without the talking, the mood blackened as we were all left to our thoughts about what was going on outside—about what had happened over the past few days, the things we'd all seen, and the bleakness of the future.

It was Murphy who piped up, "Man, the last thing I remember was you and me were in that creek bed. I don't even know how we got in the creek bed, but I remember walking in the sun."

I looked at him, "You don't remember anything? The transients? The guy who drove us to the hospital? The gym? Anything?"

“No man, nothing. Like I said, I was feeling like crap and walking up that creek bed with you, and that’s it.”

“I guess you were pretty sick—probably delirious with the fever.”

“I guess, man,” Murphy agreed. “I didn’t know what to think when I woke up cuffed to that bed yesterday.”

“Jerome didn’t tell you anything?” I asked.

“No, mostly he just stared out the window. When I’d ask him a question, he’d shush me.”

So, I took some time to relate to Murphy the story of how we made it from the creek bed to the dorm. The girls listened with great interest. I purposefully didn’t mention the jail and Murphy didn’t bring it up.

When I finished, Felicity asked, “So you guys and Jerome are all infected.”

“It seems so.”

Amber scooted up in her chair but took a moment to formulate her question. In the end, she went with bluntness. “Are you guys going to turn out like...like the others?”

“The other infected?” I asked, though I knew what she meant.

Amber nodded.

“I don’t know. Jerome says no, but he just read that on the internet.”

“So you could turn any minute?” Amber pushed on.

“I don’t know. I think if it was going to happen, it would have.” Not really a lie—perhaps a hope.

Murphy added, “As long as I don’t get any whiter, I don’t care.”

We all laughed. We needed the levity.

“What does it feel like?” Amber asked.

“What?” I asked.

“Being infected,” she clarified.

“Like the flu, a really bad flu,” I answered.

“No,” Amber said, “I mean now. Do you feel normal?”

“Mostly, I guess.”

“I feel just fine,” Murphy said, “except bright light is hard to see in.”

“Our pupils are stuck in a dilated state,” I clarified.

“What?” Amber asked.

I said, “Jerome told me. When you’re infected, your pupils dilate and stay that way.”

“Does the bright light hurt?” Amber asked.

“No,” I shook my head, “it doesn’t hurt. It just feels uncomfortable.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

"Felicity," I asked, "do you remember that infected guy that jumped out and bit me on the arm when we were in the tunnel?"

She nodded, shuddering at the memory.

"I felt the bite, but it didn't hurt. I mean, I could feel the pressure of his teeth on my arm, I even felt my skin tearing, but there wasn't any pain. It didn't hurt."

"Maybe you hit your head too hard when you fell against the wall," Felicity speculated.

I leaned forward and put Amber's hand on the large knot on the back of my head. "I felt it hit. But this didn't hurt either."

"Oh," she said.

"Yeah," I nodded.

"So, you're like a leper?" Felicity asked.

"I don't know anything about that," I answered. "I can feel things just fine. I just seem to be losing the ability to feel pain."

"Do you think you'll get to the point when you won't be able to feel anything?" Amber asked.

"I hope not."

Amber took out her telephone, checked it, and started to put it away.

"Hey," I said. "Can I borrow that to make a call?"

"Sure." She handed it to me. "Do you have family to call?"

I shook my head. "I need to call one of the nurses over at the hospital."

I dialed the number Steph had given me. Murphy and the girls started talking again.

The phone rang a half-dozen times and went to voicemail. I said, "Steph, this is Zed. Murphy and I made it out of the gym and we're okay. Call me at this number when you can. Bye."

I handed the phone back to Amber. She asked, "Girlfriend?"

"Nope. Just a nurse who helped me and Murphy out."

## Chapter 29

---

In dark sunglasses, Murphy and I were outside, scavenging what we could off of the dead soldiers in the quad. I was picking through the remains, and he was hauling the booty. At the moment, he had three rifles, two vests with clips and whatever else attached, and a couple of helmets, all covered in crusty blood.

We'd been out in the heat all through the noon hour. I was hot, sweaty, and angry.

Murphy and I talked while we were inside, rinsing the equipment in the downstairs showers. He confirmed what Jerome had told me earlier, that Mark and the other ROTC guys were afraid of us. As for Jerome, he was nowhere to be seen, though he could easily have been assisting us in equipment collection.

While outside, we didn't speak much for fear of attracting unwanted attention from the infected. But in the sweltering silence, I ruminated darkly about the social dynamic. I was angry at Jerome for being right about how I'd feel about that. I'd probably saved the life of every one of those toy rifle-toting ROTC pukes. Now, because of Murphy and me, they were all armed. They had a chance at survival. But they thought they were better than me. That pissed me off the most. I hated that.

Oh, and what was that abomination shit about?

A couple of the infected were rummaging through the remains of a policeman who lay in the shadow of the gym—one chewed on a bone, the other was starting to gnaw on the officer's gun belt. I decided that I wanted the belt. In my darkening mood, I didn't see the infected man as an obstacle. I reached down and grabbed the belt.

The infected made some kind of snarling sound, then clamped his teeth on the belt. So I yanked it hard, pulling it away.

The infected's eyes went wide with rage. He howled and lunged for the belt.

"All right," I mumbled, "if that's the way you want it."

Both of the infected stopped what they were doing and stared up at me. The words must have triggered something in their rotted brains that told them I might be lunch. One sniffed at my leg while the one with the gun belt slinked a few steps away and started to gnaw on the belt again.

My anger and disgust blossomed. I pulled the M-4 off of my shoulder. I turned its flimsy-looking stock downward, stepped over to the infected with my black leather gun belt grinding between his teeth, and smashed the butt of my gun down between his malevolent eyes.

A jolt went through his body, and he rolled over on his back, arms and legs moving in a random swimming fashion. I smashed his skull again, then again, then again—until it was deformed and bleeding heavily. He went still.

I stood over the infected man with the butt of my gun dripping with blood, breathing heavily from my exertion. I felt no cathartic release. If anything, I was more angry than before I'd beaten him to death.

What was going to happen to me? What was happening to me? Was I going to be like them? A mindless raging cannibal?

The infected who'd been gnawing on the bone dropped it and slunk over to sniff at the corpse of the one I'd just murdered.

"Fuck you too!" I shouted and smashed his head in a similar fashion—again and again—until he lay limp at my feet.

I stared down at the bloody mess, lost in the darkness of my anger.

I felt a tug at my shoulder and I turned, ready to for more violence, but it was Murphy, wide-eyed and worried.

Without a word, he held my gaze, then made a show of looking around us.

I followed his gaze. Around the quad, across the street, and into the gaps between the buildings. Every infected—standing, squatting, kneeling in the remains of some dead human—all stared at me, frozen in indecision. In their little rotted brains they couldn't tell whether I was one of them, whether I was food, or whether I was the alpha zombie.

I wanted to kill them all.

Murphy emphatically nodded his head toward the dorm a couple of times and took a tentative step in that direction.

I understood what he wanted. It was the smart thing to do. Our situation out among the infected was on the verge of getting bad in a hurry.

I snatched up my gun belt and followed Murphy back to the dorm. The infected didn't take their eyes off of us.

One of the ROTC guys opened the door for us when we arrived. He stared at me as wide-eyed as Murphy had just moments before.

He did fear me. In that moment, I reveled in his fear.

The door closed on our uncomfortable silence.

I looked out through the glass at the infected, going back about their business.

In a post-tantrum rationalization, I tried to reconcile my emotions with my actions. It didn't make sense. I tried to blame it on my anger at Jerome, Wilkins, Tom, the stress, anybody, anything but me.

Murphy said, "Hey man, we need to rinse this stuff off."

"Okay," I answered.

Murphy said to the ROTC guy, "We won't need you on the door anymore today. We're not going back out. You can go do whatever you do."

The ROTC guy looked at me and asked, "What was that all about?"

I shook my head to brush him off.

Murphy stepped in to cover for me, and in his big gruff voice he said, "That infected dude was coming after him, man."

The ROTC guy said nothing for a moment then asked, "He was coming after you?"

I nodded, "Sure."

"Really?" he asked.

“Yes.”

“Let’s take this stuff to the shower, man, and get started,” said Murphy.

“When you guys get done, you should get upstairs. It’s close to three, and Major Wilkins wants you at the meeting.”

## Chapter 30

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Murphy stood in the shower stall, scrubbing the MOLLE vest with soap and hot water. I stood outside the stall, taking the ammunition magazines out of the vest before passing them in. The helmets were all cleaned and drying, as were the guns.

"Besides rinsing these guns off, what else do we need to do?" I asked.

"I'll show you later," Murphy said.

"Do you know much about guns?"

"I was in the Army for four years," he replied.

"What?"

"Yeah, hard to believe, right?"

Yes, it was hard to believe. "So you know all about this gear, then."

"Yeah, I can show you whatever you need to know," Murphy told me.

"Good, because I don't know much of anything besides shooting and reloading."

"I'll set you straight, man, but it'll have to be when I get back."

"Back?" I asked.

"I've got to go find my mom and my sister."

I asked, "Did you try borrowing a cell phone and calling them?"

"No answer. Both numbers went straight to voicemail."

"You think their batteries are dead?"

Murphy nodded and handed me the wet vest. I handed him an empty one and hung the wet one over a shower stall divider to drip dry.

"Murphy," I said, "you know how things are out there, right?"

"Yeah, man."

"So, you know the odds aren't in their favor, right?"

"Yeah, man. I know."

"What's your plan then?"

"Based on your experience with driving yesterday, I think that driving to my mom's house isn't the best plan."

"Where do they live?" I asked

"Over off of Loyola, near 183."

"How far is that, like, five miles? Ten miles?"

"Man, I don't know. When you're driving you don't know how far things are—you know how long it's going to take to get there. "

"Yeah," I agreed. "I guess you're walking, right?"

"It's kind of the only option. I could steal a bike, but that might send the infected into a frenzy, too. I don't want to be the guy who gets to figure that one out."

I asked, "What are you going to do after you get them?"

"There's this crazy dude that used to live in our neighborhood. He was one of those doomsday-prepper guys and five or six years ago, the city found out that he'd build this three-story bunker under his house."

"Three stories under his house?" I was amazed.

"Yeah, like he had more square footage in his bunker than in his house. But like, when the city found out, they condemned his house."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He never got a permit or it wasn't built to code. Maybe they just thought his house might cave in on top of it."

"So what happened, then?"

"So the dude fights with the city for years and finally just keels over and dies one day."

"That sucks."

"For him, yeah." Murphy stepped out of the shower and handed me the vest. "The house has been sitting empty ever since. The city never did anything with it. They never tore it down or anything. It's just got a chain link fence around it and the crackheads go in there at night."

"Do you think it's still there then?" I asked.

"Man, it's gotta still be there. I don't know what kind of shape it's in. The house looks like a crack house. But there are solar panels on the roof and what looks like a solar water heater. There are a couple of little wind turbine things in the back yard. I mean, I don't know what the guy's setup was down there, but from the outside, it looked like he had all the right pieces in place."

"I know this sounds like a stupid question, but how do you know somebody isn't already there?"

Murphy shook his head, "I can't know that, but it's the best thing I can think to try right now."

"This place isn't so bad," I said.

"It's a disaster waiting to happen, Zed."

"Why do you say that?"

"Man, did you notice how they were fortifying downstairs?"

I shook my head.

"Man, they were just taking desks and furniture and piling it in front of the windows. Once the infected figure out that there are people in here, it's gonna take them like five minutes to break the windows and tear through that junk. Then it's gonna be all over for Major Wilkins and those girls you saved."

"I'm sure that's only temporary."



“Yeah, man, I’m sure you’re right, but until they get it right, they’re all in danger, and if the infected break in here all worked into a frenzy, you’re gonna get killed whether you taste good or not.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

## Chapter 31

---

When Murphy and I got to the common area on the fifth floor, Wilkins was already talking. I noticed immediately that Tom, Mark, and the other ROTC guys were all wearing MOLLE vests and had their M-4s with them. It made sense, but it made me uncomfortable. Wilkins had a sidearm, as did Marcy. Felicity, Amber, and Jerome were unarmed.

I had a Glock in a holster. Murphy however, was planning on announcing his departure and leaving directly after the meeting. He had a pistol—his M-4—and carried twelve thirty-round clips in his MOLLE vest, along with whatever else a real soldier would stuff in there.

The couches in the common area were arranged in a U-shape facing the hall. Jerome and the girls were on the couches. Wilkins stood in the hall, in front of everyone with Mark at his side. The other ROTC guys sat on stools behind the leather couches.

Murphy and I sat beside one another on one of the couches.

Wilkins acknowledged us as we sat. “As I was telling everyone, Marcy and I spent a good deal of the morning on the internet, trying to find what news we could of what’s going on.

“What we found isn’t hopeful. The infection is still spreading. San Antonio is in the same shape as Austin. It’s lost. Houston and Dallas are both a mess, with the infection spreading and the police trying to get a handle on the situation. The refugee center set up at Fort Hood fell apart overnight.

“The infection has shown up in nearly every major city in the country now and there’s hardly a place in the world that’s free. Most of Asia has followed China’s path. India, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Korea are all in chaos or are silent. Nothing is coming out of Africa. Europe and Russia are in trouble. The infection has shown up in Brazil and Columbia.

“All over the country, the military has set up road blocks. All flights are grounded. All trains have stopped. Any travel between states and even cities is forbidden. The military has orders to shoot to kill anything or anyone that comes near the roadblocks.

“We’re effectively isolated here for the time being, at least until the military can get the situation stabilized.”

Amber asked, “So, how long will we be isolated?”

Wilkins answered, “It’s anybody’s guess, but it’s best that we plan for the long haul. We need to be prepared to take care of ourselves for at least weeks, or even months. It might be longer before we get help.”

“Longer?” Amber asked.

“It might be years, Amber,” Wilkins answered.

Felicity spoke up next, with heavy emotion in her voice, “Is this really the end of the world?”

Wilkins didn’t answer. Nobody spoke. The silent consensus was yes.

Wilkins said, “Human civilization is going to be very different going forward.”

Felicity looked down at the floor. I’m sure she already knew. Her question was little more than a desperate expression of hope.

I spoke up next, “Look, like I was telling Jerome yesterday, I’m not sure how we’re going to get through the next few weeks or months, but we need to get somebody online right now. I don’t know when or if we’re going to lose electricity. I don’t know when or if the internet is going to go out.”

I stood up to look at everybody, “Everything humans have ever learned or knew can be downloaded from the internet right now, for free, while it’s still up. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I don’t know anything about farming and growing my own food. If what Wilkins is saying is right, we need to figure it out. It’ll be better for us if we figure it out with a book than by trial and error. There’s going to come a time when we run out of food to scavenge, and when that time comes, we’d better know how to grow something. We won’t be able to live through too many crop failures. And if we want to live anything remotely like the life we used to have, we’d better learn how to hook up some solar panels to an electrical grid. We need to learn how to manufacture gunpowder if we run out. There are a million little things that make life possible, and none of us knows much about any of them.”

I looked around the room for acknowledgment—for confirmation—but they just looked at me like I’d changed color again.

“Thoughts, anyone?” I asked.

“Well,” Wilkins started, “this is as good a time as any to talk about how you fit into that, Zed.”

“I don’t even have a computer,” I replied.

“Why don’t you sit down, Zed?”

What? That seemed odd to me. I looked around at the blank faces. Something wasn’t right.

As I stepped back toward the couch to take my place beside Murphy, I saw a very slight shake of his head. He was reading something here that I’d missed.

As I turned to sit down, I noticed Murphy’s hand move discreetly toward the trigger on his M-4. He flicked the safety off.

“Zed,” Wilkins started, “we all appreciate what you’ve done for us. Some of us definitely owe you our lives, and the rest of us probably do.”

I nodded, curious as to where this was going.

“Because you and Murphy and Jerome are infected, you can move among the other infected with ease. You’re in no danger.”

“Mostly no danger,” I corrected him.

“Zed, please don’t take this the wrong way, but you three are infected and that makes some of us pretty nervous. Not me, mind you. I’m not worried, but I have to speak for the group.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

"Again, as much as you've done for all of us, many here are afraid of you."

"Afraid of me?" This was starting to sound like bullshit.

Wilkins went on, "We don't know if we can catch the infection from you or how. We don't know when we're going to wake up and find you standing over our beds and attacking us. We don't know what you are, and we need to do something about that."

I heard shuffling behind me, then Murphy's big voice stopped everything. "I don't know where this conversation is going, but just so you all know one thing, I'm leaving when this is done. Actually," he continued, very deliberately standing and stepping toward the hallway, "I'm leaving right now. I need to go find my sister and my mom."

Mark butted in and said, very pointedly, "We need that ammunition you're carrying."

Murphy, beside Wilkins now, turned so that he'd have no one at his back. He was holding the M-4 with one hand over the trigger and one under the barrel, in a way that made it clear that he was fully prepared to operate the weapon if necessary. "Zed and I picked up all of this ammunition. Zed and I picked up all of the guns that you bunch of pussies have right now. If it wasn't for Zed, you wouldn't have shit. You'd be sitting in that building next door like a bunch of zombie bait, waiting to get eaten."

"All of you people piss me off. After everything that Zed has done for you, you're going to tell him to hit the bricks, aren't you? Oh, and you want to take our guns and our ammo while you're at it. Well, fuck you. I'm leaving here with this gun and this vest and the twelve clips I've got. Just so you know."

Everybody was motionless.

I spoke first, "Is that what's happening here, Wilkins? You're kicking me out?"

Mark muttered, "Of course we are. You're possessed by demons. All three of you are."

Wilkins ignored Mark and continued, "No, no. Let me finish, Zed. Clearly some of us don't feel comfortable being so close to you. We can continue to work together but we'd feel more comfortable if maybe you guys moved into the building next door."

"Without our guns," I said.

"No, that's not what we're saying," Wilkins said.

"That's what Mark just told Murphy," I retorted.

"Listen, you guys can walk outside and get all of the ammunition you need. You have to admit, it's more dangerous for us."

Murphy interrupted, "Zed, you want to come with me? Let's get the fuck outta here."

"Wait." I couldn't believe it. I looked over at Felicity. I didn't mean to plead but it probably came out that way. "I risked my life to save you guys."

Felicity quickly spoke, "Zed, we're so, so, so thankful for that. But, we saw what you did to those infected outside a little while ago. Zed, you worry us. We don't know what you're capable of, or what you might turn into."

Amber looked down and shook her head, "I don't agree, Zed, but..."

"This is bullshit!" I said. "Fine. I'm outta here. I'm not going to live in the servants' quarters next door and run around and do your dirty work. You guys are on your own."

I turned and started to walk up the hall as Murphy backpedaled beside me.

“Just so you know,” I told them, “I’m gearing up before I leave. I got all of this shit. I’m not going out empty-handed.”

They’d all stood up by then, and walked into the hall to watch Murphy and me go.

I stopped and turned, “What about you Jerome, are you coming or are you staying?”

Wilkins spoke up, “Jerome, we’d like for you to stay. We just need to work out some kind of quarantine to keep us all separate. We can’t risk getting infected. You understand, right?”

“I’d be by myself?” Jerome asked.

“Well...” Wilkins started.

Jerome shook his head. “No, no. I don’t want that. I’m going with them.”

We headed up the hall to get our stuff from the room.

Mark walked a few steps further up the hall and stopped. “Begone demon! Begone mindless monsters! You’re all going to suffer and die!”

“Put a lid on it, Mark,” Wilkins said.

Ten minutes later, Murphy, Jerome, and I walked out of the dormitory, each with an M-4, a pistol, a full load of ammunition in our MOLLE vests, canteens full of water, and enough junk food for a few meals. We hustled around the corner of the building and out of sight of the dormitory, just in case Mark went even more nuts and decided to shoot at us from the windows.

With the afternoon sun blazing in the sky, the billows of black smoke roiling up out of southeast Austin, infected lurking everywhere, and the sound of gunfire in the distance, we started our trek northeast to search for Murphy’s mother and sister.

## The End

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Follow Zed in his quest for survival in my next book, *Slow Burn: Infected*, Book Two, due out in September, 2013.

If you enjoyed *Slow Burn: Zero Day*, Book One, please take a moment to check out my other books online, and consider giving a review on the service where you purchased the book!

Also join in the conversation on my Facebook page!



# **THE RETREAT**

## **Episode One: Pandemic**

Craig DiLouie

with

Stephen Knight and Joe McKinney

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THE RETREAT is a work of fiction including a fictionalized portrayal of the U.S. Army Tenth Mountain Division, the Massachusetts Army National Guard and the City of Boston and its surrounding metropolitan region. It is not intended to depict actual persons, organizations or places.



# ONE.

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**A**MERICA. Boston. Christ Hospital.

Forty-nine days of quarantine.

At first, it was to shut the sick inside. Later, it was to keep them out.

Outside, the world was dying. The world was going to die laughing.

And the Klowns would own it all.

The sirens had stopped long ago. All day and night, the air outside the hospital filled with heavy weapons fire as the Army fought to save what was left.

The Army was losing.

## TWO.

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**D**R. JOHN BRADDOCK had fought malaria, cholera, sleeping sickness, kala azar. He'd seen people bleed out of their eyes in Africa and shit themselves to death in droves in India.

He'd never seen anything like the Bug.

He eyed his watch with rising irritation. Chief Nurse Robbins was late.

It was time to get her report. Do the rounds to check the patient charts. Review their dwindling supplies.

He already knew the score. They would find some of the patients dead in their beds and supplies low across the board. But he had to take stock of everything.

Normally, the Chief of Medicine handled that stuff, but she had the Bug, so the job had fallen on him.

He closed his eyes and listened. A woman was crying in Pathology. Distant footsteps marked the progress of one of his skeleton crew.

As a young, idealistic doctor, Braddock had joined Doctors Without Borders. After several years in Asia and Africa, the horrors he witnessed began to wear on him. In Aleppo, Syria, children lined up for measles vaccinations were torn apart in a rocket attack. In southern Sudan, refugees died from malaria after rebels looted his hospital.

He'd come home but had a difficult time reintegrating. America lived in a bubble of prosperity. He regarded his colleagues as petty and competitive. Getting things done required socializing with people he didn't understand. Hospital administrators and insurance companies constantly told him what he could and couldn't do to save lives. He didn't get along.

Braddock resigned from one job after another. Nobody lifted a finger to make him stay. He was a big man, too intense and culturally out of touch. He intimidated people. He started drinking to dull the anger. He had no sense of self. America, his home, began to feel like another foreign land.

Ellen White, Chief of Medicine at Boston's Christ Hospital, visited Braddock in his shabby motel room and offered him a job: *I believe in you, John*. She offered him a place he could call home.

He quit the bottle. Stopped fighting the system. Spent years in trauma therapy. He practiced medicine. Over time, he again began to feel like he was making a difference. He literally owed White his life. She'd brought him back from the dead.

Then she caught the Bug. So many of the others had gone to be with their families, leaving thousands of patients in his care. It was an impossible task, but he wouldn't let her down. He'd show them all, not least himself, what he was made of.

Shoes pounded the floor. He opened his eyes as Robbins approached.

"Dr. Braddock," she said, her voice edged with panic.

Another crisis. Adrenaline flooded his body. He welcomed it like a drug.

"Soldiers," she said. "They're in the hospital."

"The Army? Here?"

"They have guns."

"They're the good guys," Braddock assured her. "It's going to be all right."

At the places he'd been, soldiers usually meant trouble. Guerillas, freedom fighters, Army, paramilitaries. But not in America. In America, soldiers didn't loot hospitals.

He couldn't help but feel hopeful. They'd been on their own for months. Maybe the soldiers were here to help. Maybe they'd brought supplies so the hospital could keep functioning.

He asked Robbins why they'd come.

"I don't know," she said, fighting tears. "I asked them what they were doing here." She started crying, her voice escalating. "They said we had to evacuate. They pushed me!"

Braddock glanced over her shoulder. Another nurse watched them from a distance. "You're Chief Nurse," he whispered harshly. "Keep it together."

Seven weeks ago, she'd been overweight. Now her scrubs hung on her rail-thin body. Her sister was quarantined on the fifth floor. She hadn't heard from the rest of her family in ten days. She was under enormous stress, as they all were. But he couldn't have her cracking up. They all needed to be at their best, or they wouldn't get through this.

Robbins took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he said in a softer tone. "Just tell me where they are. I'll get some answers."

"They went upstairs."

His heart pounded. "Did they have protection? Masks, gloves—"

"No. I don't know. They weren't wearing any when they came in."

"Christ. How many of them are there?"

"A lot. Ten? Fifteen?"

Braddock rubbed his eyes. He had to find them quickly. The thought of fifteen heavily armed soldiers catching the Bug horrified him to the bone. There'd be a massacre.

## THREE.

---

**B**RADDOCK PARTED THE plastic sheeting and entered the quarantine zone. Smiling plague victims slept or stared at the ceiling. Intravenous drips fed them a barbiturate cocktail to keep them sedated. Glazed eyes followed him as he passed.

He shook his head. They shouldn't have been awake at all.

The stale air stank of disease, sweat and neglected bedpans. It was the height of summer, and the air conditioning and ventilation had been turned off to conserve power. The hospital had become an oven. He heard the steady hiss of breath from hundreds of mouths.

On a warm night six weeks ago, Braddock had been working in the emergency room. He thrived on the pulse of the ER—the rollercoaster of boredom and crisis. Even after everything, he was still an intensity seeker. The volume of admissions was staggering. Not a single patient had a disease. They were all trauma cases—broken bones, lacerations, gunshot and knife wounds. A man with a broken bottle in his ass. A woman with a yolky pulp where her left eye had been. A man partially flayed alive. Most were in deep shock. Those who could speak told stories of horror, about how the people they loved had savaged them.

He'd never seen anything like it. When morning finally came, Braddock was sewing stitches into his ninth stab wound. The victims just kept coming. The wail of sirens filled the city—police vehicles, ambulances, fire trucks. The sky grayed with smoke.

A SWAT team wearing respirator masks brought the first diseased people in armored cars. They dragged them inside by the necks with restraint poles. The doctors sedated them, and orderlies strapped them onto gurneys. The first quarantine ward was established on the third floor. Then another and another until the hospital filled with carriers of the Bug.

After that, the police quarantined the entire hospital, enforced it at gunpoint.

The disease killed the old and the very young, while everybody else suffered from *frontotemporal dementia* similar to Pick's Disease. The dementia resulted in a *dysexecutive syndrome* that manifested as severe aggression.

All of which was a very scientific way of saying that men and women would suddenly decide to go after their loved ones with garden shears for a few hours of torture and murder.

Nobody knew why they laughed.

Pathological laughter could be caused by tumors, drug addiction or chromosomal and neurological disorders making the nervous system go haywire. Of all the possible causes, dementia seemed the most viable.

But the laughter seemed purposeful. The infected appeared to enjoy inflicting or receiving pain. They laughed while they shoved a toilet plunger down somebody's

throat. Putting a bullet in their guts sent them into hysterics.

Otherwise, the crazies retained higher brain function. They walked and talked. They displayed a rudimentary cunning. They remembered how to load a shotgun and where they kept the rake in the garage. But they had no sense of self. They felt compelled to seek out others and hurt them until they killed or infected them. They were puppets pulled on a string by the Bug. More than that, they were *partners*. The Bug wasn't evil. It only wanted to be spread. The method of spreading was up to those it infected—their memories and creativity. That was the evil part.

After a while, the Bug was categorized as a virus, but nobody knew where it had originated. It appeared to be synthetic, but if the government knew who made it, they weren't telling. For a time, the media reported that members of an apocalyptic cult called the Four Rider Army had cooked up the Bug and had flown around the world spreading it. It boggled Braddock's mind that a few crazy people could build a virus that could make the whole world go insane.

*Transmissibility: bodily fluids, which mainlined the virus to the brain.*

*Infection rate: 100%.*

*Incubation and symptoms: ten seconds to ten minutes.*

Braddock theorized that some people might not show symptoms for days. From a medical standpoint, it was fascinating. From a human standpoint, the worst horror imaginable. Humanity might not become extinct, but it might go crazy.

If the Four Rider Army wanted an apocalypse, they were sure as hell getting one.

The disease continued to spread outside the hospital. The news trucks sped off in search of other horrors. The police left with their barricades. The supplies stopped being delivered.

After that, Braddock gave the staff a choice: Stay and try to keep the patients alive, or go home to their families. Most left.

Braddock locked the doors and went to work. He avoided watching the news. Looking out the nearest window told him everything he needed to know. It was far worse out there than it was in here.

They carried on. They had to. Braddock knew how cheap life was—and how valuable. The days blurred into weeks. Eventually, they would run out of sedative, and the patients would wake up hungry and wanting to play.

After that...

He hadn't thought that far ahead. Maybe he'd find some other place where he could do some good. Maybe he'd just give up. Nurse Robbins would stay to the end because of her sister. Braddock would likely stay with her. The hospital was his home.

On the fifth floor, Braddock found a group of heavily armed soldiers dragging his patients out of their beds and hog-tying them on the floor. The diseased opened their eyes and grinned.

## FOUR.

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THE SOLDIERS RAISED their weapons and screamed at him to get on the ground.

"What are you doing to my patients?" Braddock demanded.

"Get down on the fucking ground!"

They wore camouflage Army combat uniforms tucked into brown boots. Tactical vests stiff with armor and bulging with gear. Kevlar helmets with that slightly unsettling *Wehrmacht* look.

Their shoulder patches read MOUNTAIN with a symbol of two crossed swords.

One of them had stenciled TEOTWAWKI on his helmet.

"I'm not infected!" Braddock realized he probably looked it with his beard, matted hair and grimy scrubs and labcoat. He raised his hands and shut his eyes in fear.

A stocky, powerfully muscled man commanded, "Lower your weapons. He doesn't have it." To Braddock, he added, "I'm Sergeant Ramos, Tenth Mountain Division. We're under orders. You need to vacate this area immediately and let us do our jobs, sir."

The *sir* hung in the air, dripping with disdain. The bland, boyish faces of the squad regarded him as if they might have to shoot him anyway, just to be the safe side.

Braddock stood over six feet tall. He'd boxed as a young man and would gladly take on any of these punks in the ring. As a group, though, they unnerved him. They'd been through hell. They were exhausted and close to the edge, relying on their training to keep it together.

He tried to see them patriotically as American soldiers, men who risked their lives in defense of their country and did their jobs whether they agreed with the mission or not. But at the moment, they were invaders, and they scared the shit out of him.

Braddock counted five. Robbins had made it sound as though there was a squad in the building, maybe two. Where were the rest?

He spared a worried glance at Ellen White. She lay with her eyes closed and wearing her dreamy smile. Her long, graying hair lay neatly brushed on the pillow. He visited her often to give her status updates. He hoped she could somehow hear him and feel assured her hospital was still running. Even now, he sought her approval.

The fifth floor was special for another reason. The ward was where Braddock had initiated an experimental treatment based on the Milwaukee Protocol, used to treat rabies. The patient was loaded with midazolam and ketamine to induce a coma, and then fed amantadine and ribavirin to fight the virus. He'd just started it. Anything was worth a try.

Now these soldiers were ruining the experiment.

"May I ask what your orders are?" he asked, trying to sound polite. He still trembled from the shock of seeing guns pointed at him.

Ramos ignored his question. "Who's in charge here?"

"I am. I'm the acting Chief of Medicine."

"Then you'd better start evacuating the hospital. Get your staff out as fast as you can."

"And then what? Go where?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Wherever you want. Someplace safe. There are safety shelters."

"Who can I talk to about this? Who's in command?"

"The lieutenant. He's upstairs with another fireteam."

*Okay, we're talking. This is good. We're talking about it.* "I'll go speak to him then. Please don't do anything until I get back. Ten minutes."

"We've got our orders. You have yours. Get your staff out."

The men smelled like smoke and fear. Their eyes were wild. They weren't crossing the line. The whole country was. There'd been a decision at the top.

"You don't have to do this, Sergeant."

"Just get your people out, Doc," Ramos said, his expression softening to reveal the man behind the mission mask. "You don't want to see this."

"How bad is it out there?"

"Bad enough for this. Desperate times, desperate measures. Understand?"

"You still have a choice. These are innocent people. Innocent, *sick* people."

Fighting the infected out in the street was one thing. Murdering sick people in their beds in cold blood was something else. Sick *civilians*.

"We have our orders."

"Shit orders," a tall, wiry Black soldier said.

Ramos wheeled. "What did you just say, Private?"

The Black soldier nodded at Braddock. "He's right, Sergeant." He pronounced it *Sarrunt*, making it sound deferential and defiant at the same time. "We don't have to do it."

Braddock said nothing. He'd learned when to talk and when to shut up.

"This is bullshit," added another soldier with a handsome, boyish face. He looked like he'd be more at home surfing some wave in California than sweating here in a combat uniform. "It's just us, with the ammo we got, and we have to waste the whole hospital? There are thousands of people here. Where's the rest of the company?"

"We lost our commo," said the Black soldier. "Maybe the operation was scrubbed."

"Maybe the rest of the company is fucking *dead*," said the surfer.

A third soldier, sporting a stained bandage on his left cheek, pointed at the bodies in the beds. "You've seen what these people do. They killed our guys. They're not even people. I say, kill them all."

"Best to put them out of their misery now before they wake up, and we have to fight them on the streets," agreed a fourth soldier. "We should put down as many as we can."

The group was split down the middle. The sergeant was the tie-breaker.

"It's not up for a vote," Ramos said. He lowered his shotgun and fired a round at the middle-aged man lying in front of him.

Blood and brains sprayed across the floor. Some flew onto the legs of Braddock's scrubs. The sound flattened his eardrums. His ears rang in the aftermath.

The soldier with the bandaged face grinned, revealing two missing front teeth. "Hooah, Sergeant."

Ramos's casual execution of one of the infected, which was supposed to demonstrate simplicity and resolve, backfired. The rest of the soldiers paled at the sight.

Braddock backed away in horror. One of the patients on the floor tried to take a bite out of his leg, forcing him to take another step back. The woman's jaws clamped shut with an audible click that made him shiver.

People didn't just wake up alert after being yanked out of a chemically induced coma. But the Bug was tough. It always wanted to play.

"Fuck this," the surfer dude said.

"We've all done it," the man with the bandaged face told him. "Lots of times."

"Not like this. Not while they're sleeping. They look like people."

Braddock flinched at the sound of gunfire coming from a higher floor. No flurry—the shots were methodical. Executions. They were going to kill everybody in the hospital. The debate was pointless. The soldiers had orders. The ability of the Army to function at all depended on following orders, the chain of command. Sometimes, the orders sucked.

"The rest of the platoon is already in action," Ramos said. "We're doing this. Now."

Braddock felt something inside him burst, releasing energy that threatened to go in a direction he couldn't control and might very well get him killed. He'd worked too hard to keep those people alive to see them hamstrung and slaughtered like livestock. There was still hope. Modern medicine could cure the virus. They just needed a little more time. The world owed them a little more time.

He disconnected Ellen White's intravenous feeding tube and restraints. He picked her up in his arms. She seemed to weigh nothing. She sucked her thumb like a child. She believed in him. He owed her his life.

"Come on, Chief," he whispered. "I've got you."

The sergeant said: "Sir? Sir! What the fuck are you doing?"

White's eyes flashed open, bright and intelligent. Braddock looked at her and didn't see the Bug. He saw the Chief of Medicine. She reached up to touch his face with trembling hands. She whimpered.

"*Sir!*" the sergeant roared. He raised his weapon, a monstrous shotgun.

"Ellen," Braddock said. "It's John. I'm here."

She was still in there. Pleading.

*The treatment. It works.*

She was getting better, and the sergeant was going to kill them both.

*Don't shoot. Please. Don't. Shoot.*

"Put her down and step back! Now!"

Braddock had no choice. He was going to have to do as they asked. He kissed her on the forehead. "I'm sorry, Ellen."

She plunged her thumbs into his eyes.

He screamed and gripped her wrists. His vision roared in mottled shades of dark and light. Searing pain stabbed through his skull. He flung her away.

Then it stopped.



He wasn't screaming anymore.  
He was laughing.  
It was *hilarious*.

# THE RETREAT

## ***FIVE.***

---

***F***IGHT OR FLIGHT. Private First Class Scott Wade wanted to run.

Then his training took over.

He raised his M4 carbine and fired a single burst. The doctor howled with animal glee as the bullets stitched his chest and flung him against the wall in a spray of blood.

The big man sprawled, twitching and smoking. He drew a rattling breath, giggled and died.

The old woman struggled to a sitting position. She started to crawl laughing toward Wade. *“Cut off your balls—”*

Wade blew her away too, painting the wall with her brains.

He was following orders, completing the mission. But it was more than that.

*Fucking monsters.*

The excited plague victims squirmed against their restraints like giant larvae. Methodical gunshots came from the floor above and the floor below.

He saw red.

Ramos lowered his shotgun. “Nice work. Now let’s—”

Wade leveled his carbine and lit up the patients. The rest of the squad joined in. They ripped the infected to shreds. Mattress stuffing filled the air.

Wade screamed as he drained his magazine.

Then fell to his knees, retching.

From the stress, the heat, the exhaustion, the shock, all of it.

## SIX.

---

**W**ADE HAD LOVED to play Army as a kid growing up in rural Wisconsin. His parents didn't let him play with toy guns, so he and his friends used sticks. His younger sister, Beth, preferred dolls and tea parties, but she sometimes joined in so she could be near him.

To him and his friends, war was wondrous play. The bad guys went down in a hail of gunfire. Sometimes, a good guy died, a noble sacrifice played out with plenty of drama.

At the end, they all went home happy and tired. They'd faced danger and fought through it. They'd looked death in the eye and walked away.

Wade would later look back on those summers as the best times in his life.

In high school, he became interested in sports and girls. He smoked a little dope and drank when he thought he could get away with it. He spent a lot of time hanging out in a bank parking lot with his friends. He had a lot of fun but had a sense of doing time until the rest of his life started.

Soldiers were leaving Iraq and fighting in Afghanistan. He wasn't interested in war anymore because he had come to understand it as a horrifying thing. Once you died, you stayed dead. But the instincts of his childhood remained.

His high school years were winding down. He saw his whole privileged future laid out for him: college, high-paying job, marriage, house, kids, retirement, death. In many ways, he felt like an overgrown boy. There was no rite of passage for his generation. He wanted to challenge himself before catching that train. Soon, Wade would get to make his own choices. The right challenge, he knew, would make him a man.

He decided to join the Army. He expected his anti-war parents to try to talk him out of it, but they were proud of him. Even Beth, who'd long ago given up worshipping her brother, hugged him during their tearful farewell and later wrote him once a week. Those letters became his lifeline to the real world during his training and deployment.

After Basic Training, he was classified 11-B. Infantry. He ended up in the Tenth Mountain Division. His combat patch displayed two crossed swords suggesting the Roman numeral X. The Mountaineers. Lightfighters. Climb to Glory.

Wade got more than he bargained for in Korengal Valley in Afghanistan.

His platoon lived in a tiny outpost on an exposed mountainside. He froze in the winter and suffered in the summer. During the fighting season, Taliban fighters arrived from Pakistan and lobbed mortar rounds at them. They dropped bursts of plunging machine gun fire before disappearing over the ridges. They rigged improvised explosives on the roads. They ambushed the Americans from trees and rocks.

There was no glory in it. The weird thing was that he enjoyed combat far more than he thought he would. It was a rush, the most exciting thing in the world. As long as everybody in his unit made it out the other end of a firefight alive, combat was even

exalting. He lived more in those intense flashes of fighting than in all the rest of his nineteen years put together.

And he found something else in war.

Love.

He loved the guys he fought with. They could be hilarious and sullen, wise and ignorant, fun and grating. The Army had all kinds. Sometimes, he couldn't stand looking at them. But he loved them enough to die for them. He knew they'd do the same for him without hesitation.

When he fought, it was for them. The worst thing that could happen out in the shit wasn't that he died. It was letting his comrades down and getting one of them killed.

This responsibility had kept him going after carrying seventy pounds of weapons and gear across miles of mountainous terrain. Made him stay sharp while functioning on little sleep for weeks at a stretch. Kept him fighting when the ground around him exploded during an ambush.

It was why he double checked his bootlaces before leaving the wire, carefully stripped and oiled his gun, performed every single mind-numbing equipment check. He gulped water to stay hydrated and watched every single step so he didn't break silence.

Because if he made one little mistake, people got killed, and it would be on him. They depended on each other more than they did God.

The mission sucked. Afghanistan sucked. But still, he felt that he was making a difference there, that he was doing something good.

That was all he wanted: to be tested, to prove himself and to make a difference.

As his tour of duty in Afghanistan came to an end, Wade started to recognize the price he would have to pay. It would be hard as hell to assimilate into his old life. He would finally have to process the trauma he'd experienced. He would suffer withdrawal from the adrenaline of combat. He would despair over leaving the rest of the guys on that mountain to fight without him.

War brought out the worst in man but also the best.

Then Tenth Mountain flew home to a different kind of war.

## **SEVEN.**

---

**S**OON AFTER DEPLOYMENT IN BOSTON, Wade called his parents to make sure they were okay.

His sister answered.

Beth told him all the things she'd done to Mom and Dad. She told him what she wanted to do to him.

He listened to all of it. He just wanted to hear her voice. By the end, he was so numb he could barely speak.

The last thing he said was that he loved her. That it wasn't her fault. That he forgave her.

She responded with hysterical laughter. Laughter so hard he could hear her wheezing. That was when he knew the sister he loved was still in there, a prisoner of the madness.

The infected laughed when they inflicted pain.

They also laughed when they experienced it.

Wade still kept a photo of her in his helmet. He looked at it so he could remember who she was, and didn't have to think about her smashing in their parents' heads with one of Dad's golf clubs.

He hated the infected. He hated them for turning her into one of them.

He shot the people in the hospital because, at that moment, he wanted to kill anything not wearing a uniform.

## ***EIGHT.***

---

**T**HE HOSPITAL. The quarantine ward, now a slaughterhouse.

Wade admitted a primitive satisfaction in putting down the people that the soldiers of Bravo Company were calling Klowns, short for Killer Clowns. The crazies were so terrifying that every kill flooded him with warm cathartic relief. But then remorse came quick and hard.

He was fighting unarmed crazy people in an insane war. Every time he survived combat, he didn't feel alive. He felt as if he were dying a little. Soon, there'd be nothing left of him but a ghost. A killing machine.

Ramos clapped him on the shoulder. "On your feet, Wade."

As usual, there was no time for thinking, feeling, any of it.

Still, nobody moved, eyeing their grisly handiwork with dawning awareness. It had taken seconds to lose control, for the operation to turn into a massacre.

Which was more terrifying than anything. What they'd just done wasn't about following orders. They'd completely lost it, and they knew it.

They were soldiers. Soldiers couldn't make mistakes, but men did.

Day to day, it was becoming less about the job and the mission, and more about survival, simply staying alive.

Then even that shock wore off.

Wade hauled himself to his feet and raised his tactical goggles, which had fogged from the humidity. He detached his magazine. Empty. He slapped a new magazine into his carbine and put a round into the firing chamber. Locked and loaded. Ready to kill again.

"Well, that's one room done," Eraserhead said with a grin that showed his missing teeth.

"Hurray," Williams said with obvious sarcasm. "Only a hundred to go."

"They don't expect us to do all of them, do they?" Ford asked.

Ramos's squad had two fireteams: Alpha, which was Wade's, and Bravo, which had stayed outside in the hospital parking lot with the Humvees, providing exterior security for the operation. Wade still sometimes viewed his comrades in Alpha with the social lens he'd developed over his high school years. Williams, tall and wiry, was the squad's nerd. The only Black man in the platoon, he was a brainy kid who'd grown up in poverty in Detroit and joined the Army to gain marketable skills. The guys ribbed him for reading the articles in *Playboy* and called him Doctor Mist.

Ford was the jock. He was good looking enough to be an actor but was mystified by women. He constantly read books on how to seduce them. He looked at Wade as some kind of Casanova because Wade had had a steady girlfriend in high school.

And Billy Cook, the giant kid the guys called Eraserhead, was the oddball. He had crazy eyes. He said weird things, out of the blue, even during a firefight. He was built

like a refrigerator. He was also the only man in the squad besides Ramos who wasn't on psychiatric meds, who didn't take sleeping pills to keep from jolting awake in the middle of the night at the sound of imaginary laughter.

Wade looked at Ramos. "What about the staff?"

"What about them?"

"We should evacuate them. Get them out."

"The operation's started," Ramos said. "If we see somebody, we'll tell them to pass the word along to get out. Otherwise, they're not our problem."

Wade sometimes wondered if they all had the disease, but it affected people on a spectrum, meaning they were all insane to one degree or another. Maybe the officer who'd given the order to exterminate the infected at the hospital was half-batshit himself.

"Is anyone playing with a full deck these days?" he asked.

Ramos shook his head. "That question is above my pay grade."

The country was tearing itself apart, and he was taking part in it. That made him want to throw down his rifle and walk away. The situation was deteriorating by the minute with him there. Would it matter if he wasn't?

He looked at his comrades and knew he could never do that.

"It's not too late to get the hell out of here," Williams said. "This is a shit mission."

"It'll be okay," Ford said. "We'll—"

"Shut your dicktraps," Ramos growled. "Check your weapons."

Eraserhead grinned over his SAW. "I heard Kate Upton caught the Bug."

"Bullshit," Williams said.

"Could you imagine her coming at you with a baseball bat?" Ford asked.

"Naked?" Williams qualified.

"It'd be worth it," said Eraserhead. "Either way."

The boys chuckled, careful not to laugh too loud or too hard. They passed around a can of dip.

Wade shook his head. "What's next, Sergeant?"

"We clear the next—"

They heard a burst of laughter out in the hallway.

The fireteam bristled. They glanced at the door before settling their eyes on the hulking Ramos and his Sledgehammer, the devastating AA-12 combat shotgun. The sergeant flashed them the hand signal to prepare for action.

Wade eyed the other members of his fireteam. Nobody did anything without the others knowing about it. Nobody moved unless somebody stayed behind, scanning for threats.

More laughter came, followed by the electrifying sound of a woman screaming.

Wade guessed the staff had heard the shooting and were trying to save the patients just as the doctor had. Saving them meant disconnecting them from the barbiturate cocktail flowing into their veins.

The Klowns were waking up.

"Get ready to move," Ramos said. "If it's laughing, kill it."

The boys hustled into position. They had no doubts now about what they had to do.



Kill them all or die.

## NINE.

---

**I**N THE CROWDED TRAILER he was using as his headquarters, Lt. Colonel Joseph Prince studied the big electronic map and dry swallowed an Advil.

Little blue icons displayed First Battalion's sprawling deployment around the Greater Boston area. A large blue icon indicated his headquarters at Hanscom Air Force Base in Bedford, home to the 66th Air Base Group before it had been relocated.

Yellow icons showed live fire incidents—units in contact. There were a lot of those, more and more every day. Some never stopped being in contact. As for red icons indicating opposition forces, there were none. The enemy was everywhere. *The enemy is us*, as Pogo once said. The enemy included his wife and son, infected and running amok until they'd been shot down in the street like dogs.

He knocked back a second Advil and tried not to think about that.

The colonel didn't need the big board to tell him he was losing a war against his own country. He'd made rank by following orders. He never bitched. He always took the fight to the enemy. "Conventional doctrine, aggressive action, flawless execution" was his motto.

Prince wasn't very imaginative, but he was reliable, and he usually got results. He was used to having the kind of firepower that could flatten anything that got in his way.

The current conflict defied the imagination. The enemy was American citizens, the mission objectives vague, the rules of engagement contradictory. His lightfighters had taken twenty percent losses in continuous operations, while each afternoon, the colonel met with civilian lawyers to review every after-action report and decision that affected American lives and property. He could just imagine their faces when he told them the order had come down from Regimental HQ to terminate the infected in the quarantine hospitals.

Prince was used to freedom of action with massive amounts of power. Now he felt like a spider caught in its own web.

Video monitors next to the big board rolled horrific images transmitted by aerial drones, blimps and long-range cameras. Exhausted staffers sitting in front of flat screens and stacked radios managed operations and talked to units in the field. Foam cups, water bottles and mission binders cluttered the desktops. Dead cans of Red Bull filled the trash bins. The room smelled like nervous sweat and stale coffee.

CNN was broadcasting video of an office high-rise. A massive fireball bloomed from the side of the tower. Then another. Glass and debris rained onto the streets.

Prince recognized the landscape and its scars: Boston's Financial District.

## TEN.

---

**G**UNFIRE RATTLED. Wade felt the muffled thuds in his feet. First Squad was in action downstairs. Outside in the hall, the screaming stopped. Then it started again.

"Fix bayonets," Ramos said quietly.

In Afghanistan, Wade hadn't used his bayonet once. But they weren't in Afghanistan. This was a different enemy. This enemy didn't stop until their hands were on you or they were dead.

He gripped his carbine, weapon shouldered and pointed at the floor. The fireteam glared fiercely at Ramos, waiting for the order to step off. They wanted to move, shoot something. Get it over with. Thousands of people slept inside the hospital. If they all woke up, the squad's only hope of survival was to rush and shoot their way to the Humvees.

Then call in an airstrike.

Ramos keyed his headset microphone to contact Lieutenant Harris, who led the team on the floor above. "Antidote Six, this is Antidote Two-Two. How copy, over?"

"Antidote Two-Two, this is Antidote Six. We have heavy contact. The hospital is compromised. Repeat. The hospital is—"

A long, sustained explosion of gunfire drowned out the rest. The soldiers glanced upward. The Klowns were on every floor, it seemed.

"Bad copy, Antidote Six. 'Hospital compromised' is received. Request orders. Over."

Ramos waited for Harris's response and got more thunder instead.

"Antidote Six, Antidote Six, this is Antidote Two-One. Over." The sergeant leading First Squad was trying to cut in, his voice professional but edged with panic. "Antidote Six, how copy?"

"Let's go, let's go," Williams said.

*This is getting seriously bad*, Wade thought. "We've got to move, Sergeant."

"And I have to find out if we're bugging out or sticking with the original OPORD. So shut it." Ramos repeated his request for orders into his headset.

Wade exchanged a glance with Ford. *Does the LT think we're still good to go for this shit mission? An understrength platoon against thousands of homicidal maniacs? They had to get out. Every second they delayed sealed their fate. Where the hell's the rest of Bravo Company?*

"We'll be out of this in no time," Ford said. "Back at the FOB for a hot and a cot."

Wade nodded, though he didn't believe a word of it.

A massive boom shook the building. Acoustic tiles fell from the ceiling and crashed to the floor. Somebody upstairs had thrown a grenade. The screaming in the hall died, replaced by waves of howling laughter.

Wade took a deep breath and felt sudden calm wash over him. His pulse slowed, and he became intensely aware of his surroundings.

Ramos was a seasoned non-com, one of the Army's centurions. He knew what he was doing. Wade trusted him to get them out. Otherwise, it was out of Wade's hands. He would fight for himself and his comrades. Either he would die, or he wouldn't.

Ramos shook his head. "All right, we're going to—"

"All Antidote Ops, retrograde to the Humvees. Abort operation. Antidote Six, out."

"Antidote Six, Antidote Two-Two. That's a solid copy. Out." The sergeant loaded a round into his shotgun's firing chamber. "Listen up. We're getting out of here. Hard and fast."

"I was scheduled to go on leave two days ago," Eraserhead muttered.

"We know, we know," Williams said.

"I should be in a bar somewhere, getting so drunk I piss myself."

"We know," Williams repeated.

Another grenade went off upstairs. The lights blinked several times.

"At least you'll still get the chance to piss yourself," Williams added.

Downstairs, the gunfire stopped. The lack of sound was even more alarming than the grenades.

"Step off in three, two, one," Ramos said.

"See you on the other side," Eraserhead told them.

Wade tensed, ready to kill.

It wasn't murder anymore. It was survival.

Ford opened the door.

## ELEVEN.

---

**L**T. COLONEL PRINCE watched the landmark office tower get bombed on live television. It was mesmerizing in its way. Not the violence, but the fact *nobody was doing a damned thing about it*.

That alone told him everything he needed to know about the current situation.

Another section of the building vomited fire, smoke and glass. The camera shook. Prince recognized the building. The Federal Reserve Bank. At the bottom of the screen, triple captions scrolled public service announcements and propaganda. In the upper right: LIVE.

The United States Army had an operations manual for everything. Prince liked to say, "There's an op for that."

There was no op for what he was seeing. Whoever was doing the shooting was military.

"Major Walker," he barked.

The major signed a clipboard and returned it to a staff sergeant manning the radios. He approached wearing a slight smile Prince wanted to punch off his face.

"Colonel?"

"Something amuse you, Major?"

"No, sir. Just trying to be positive in front of the men, sir."

Walker was hiding something. Prince had never liked his executive officer. The man was a politician, a cold snake, and he sucked as a soldier. Walker was nothing more than a desk warrior. But he was a wizard at getting things done.

The colonel let it pass. He found he really didn't care what Walker might be hiding behind that creepy little smile of his. "How's the operation coming along?"

"Which operation, sir?"

"Mercy." That was the name the Brass had given the operation to terminate the infected in the major quarantine hospitals. It involved three companies, most of their fighting strength.

"Forces are en route."

"Outstanding. What about the Governor?"

"We're still talking to his people."

Colonel Armstrong, commander of the 55th Infantry Regiment—the "Double Nickel"—and Prince's boss, had issued another critical operational order, or OPORD. His boys were to round up the governor of Massachusetts and other senior civilian officials and put them in a safe place, per the Federal Continuity of Government plan.

"Talk faster. Get it done. Understand?"

The major's tall, slim body stiffened into a respectful stance. "Yes, sir."

On CNN, another round hit the Federal Reserve Bank. Prince flinched as if he were there. The building was burning in a dozen places, pumping black smoke into

the air.

According to the Army, after two to four days of little rest, an extended sleep is needed—twelve to fourteen hours. The colonel had barely slept in over a month. Exhaustion on this level was like being drunk. Leaders made mistakes when they were this tired. He needed to stay sharp.

He dry swallowed another Advil and tried not to think about that. The muscles in his face were numb. His head pounded in time with his steady heartbeat, threatening a blinding migraine.

Prince had often marveled at how much power he held commanding a light infantry battalion. Eight hundred men. Tenth Mountain. Climb to Glory. The best infantry in the world.

They were First Battalion, part of the 55th Infantry Regiment, Fifth Brigade Combat Team, Tenth Mountain Division, XVIII Airborne Corps. Six companies—Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, Echo (an attached forward support company providing logistics), and HQ (call sign, The Wizard). These forces were supplemented by the Tomcats, an attack aviation battalion; the Trailblazers, a scout platoon; Thunder, a mortar platoon; and Nightingale, a medic platoon.

When Colonel Armstrong, call sign Big Brother, had contacted Prince and explained that the Army had been called into action, Prince had responded like a dog freed from its leash.

He thought it would take days. Weeks rolled by. The division was soon spread all over New England, getting chewed up by real estate agents and housewives turned into laughing sadists and suicide bombers.

They hadn't cleaned up the mess. They'd become part of it.

When Big Brother reached out to him, he'd had a choice. He could have gone home and protected Susan and Frankie. If he had, they wouldn't have caught the Bug, and they wouldn't have been shot down in the street like rabid dogs. Prince had thought he could do more for them where he was, helping to maintain order and halt the spread of infection. Over the past two months, he'd accomplished little more than slowing the tide, and even that was questionable.

The massive, constant headache he suffered had started right after he realized that.

Walker eyed him with open concern. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Affirmative." Prince pointed at the video image of the blazing office tower, which was still taking hits. "That's Boston. And that's heavy ordnance. On live television. Who the hell is doing the shooting, and why is nobody putting a stop to it?"

Walker said nothing.

"Get me some answers."

"Right away, sir." Walker's enigmatic smile returned as he gave the video monitor a final lingering glance. "The apocalypse will be televised."

## TWELVE.

---

**R**AMOS RAISED HIS Sledgehammer as he cleared the doorway. Wade followed, pointing his carbine the other way. Eraserhead with the SAW, the squad automatic weapon, was next, followed by Williams with his M4/203.

Grinning Klowns filled the corridor. Several stomped on the half-stripped, mangled body of a nurse lying on the floor. Others watched and roared with laughter, hands on their hips or gripping their stomachs. The nurse was laughing too.

When the infected noticed the soldiers pointing guns at them, they cheered and shrieked with glee as if the guests had finally arrived at their surprise party. Once again, Wade was disturbed by their faces. They looked like clowns with their wide glassy eyes and crazy leers.

One stumbled close to Ramos and giggled. Ramos cut him in half with a blast of buckshot.

As if they'd been waiting for a signal, the crazies charged.

Wade sighted center mass on a woman and fired a burst. The recoil hummed against his shoulder. She went down. Another took her place. Another. And another.

Spent shell casings flew from the carbine's eject port and clattered to the floor. The metallic crack of the carbines and the roar of the sergeant's shotgun pounded his ears.

Eraserhead got the SAW into position and fired controlled bursts. The mob disintegrated, bodies blowing apart under the withering fire. Tracer rounds streamed down the hallway.

Wade gasped. The scene was like something out of a movie.

And more kept coming.

"Reloading!" Wade pocketed an empty magazine and slapped a new one into his carbine. He pulled the charging bolt, aimed and fired.

Behind him, the Sledgehammer boomed. The infected were coming at them from the other end of the corridor.

Combat was typically unpredictable, but Wade knew their survival here was a matter of simple mathematics. Either they had enough bullets, or they didn't. Even if they did, if there were too many infected, their guns would eventually overheat and start jamming.

That was how military units got overrun by crowds of infected: human wave attacks against small groups of soldiers who fired until their weapons jammed. Klowns didn't take prisoners. They either killed you or made you one of them.

Wade fired. A bald man's head erupted in a geyser of brains and blood.

"Nice shot," Eraserhead said. "I knew you had it in you."

"Go to hell," Wade told him.

The SAW was rocking now, firing nine hundred rounds per minute, every fifth a blurred tracer that pulsed strobing red light. Eraserhead was grinning. "Time for some payback."

A severed hand trailing a long rag of flesh and tissue slapped against Wade's chest and flopped to the floor. The Klowns were throwing body parts at them.

Williams dropped an empty magazine from his carbine. "Reloading!"

Wade glanced at the hand lying on the floor. He laughed. He couldn't stop himself. It just rolled out of him. He wasn't infected. The whole situation was insane. He'd survived a year of combat against the Taliban, and he was going to die fighting a mob of murderous maniacs throwing arms and legs at him. He had to either laugh or scream.

But laughing was a good way to get himself killed. He half expected his comrades to train their weapons on him. Instead, Eraserhead started chuckling.

Then they were all laughing at the infected as they killed them by the dozens.

Laughter really was contagious.

The crowd was thinning. The soldiers kept the fire hot. Eraserhead put down the last of them with a few bursts. The squad ceased fire.

Wade raised his goggles, which had fogged again. The hallway was shrouded in a thick, smoky haze. Broken, bleeding bodies lay in piles in their shredded hospital gowns. The sight should have sickened him, but he could only stare in morbid fascination. He knew he shouldn't look at all. He knew the tableau would haunt his nightmares the rest of his life.

Ramos tapped his shoulder. "Get ready to move!"

Wade blinked, surprised he was still alive. "Roger that, Sergeant."

They reloaded. They'd burned through most of their ammunition, and they were going to have to get out of the hospital quickly.

Eraserhead opened the SAW's feed tray, laid in a new ammo belt and slammed the tray shut. He yanked the charging bolt. "Good to go."

Wade heard muffled reports. The gunfire on the floor below them was barely audible over the loud ringing in his ears. No sounds filtered from above.

Ramos tapped his headset. "I can't get the LT on the radio. We're going up."

Nobody protested. *Leave no man behind.* It wasn't just a noble idea; it motivated them to face danger, knowing their comrades would come for them.

They'd have to move fast. The building was filling up with crazies awake and dying to play.

The fireteam chased after Ramos. They flung open the stairwell door and sprinted up the stairs, gasping under the weight of gear and armor.

They banged onto the sixth floor, weapons at the ready.

Nothing. They bounded down the hall. Two men covered while the others moved.

The walls were painted in blood.

"Jesus Christ," Ford said.

Grimacing bodies and spent brass covered the floor. Some of the bodies wore uniforms and clutched broken weapons. One soldier, his back against a wall, still held the barrel of his rifle in his mouth. A section of wall smoldered, blown out by a



grenade. Wade looked up at the ceiling. A bare leg protruded from a shattered acoustic tile next to a dangling fluorescent fixture. Gunsmoke hung in the air.

Ramos called a security halt. The men stopped and formed a circle, backs to the center, guns pointed outward.

"It's like a slaughterhouse," Ford said.

The soldiers here had died in hand-to-hand fighting. The mob had rolled over them and moved on. Wade recognized the faces of men he knew well: Eckhardt, Jones, Hernandez, Richardson, Lopez, Cox. He didn't see Lieutenant Harris.

Despair washed over him. His mind flashed to mountain views and firefights, freezing together in cramped bunkers at Combat Outpost Katie, patrols carrying seventy pounds of gear. Endless hours of joking, hazing, rough sports and petty squabbling.

Wade looked at his squad and knew they were remembering the same things.

"Those motherfuckers," Eraserhead hissed.

"Our guys gave better than they got," Wade said.

Eraserhead spit on a corpse. "How does that make it right?"

Ramos nodded. "Honorable deaths."

Wade remembered that last horrible night at Katie, when they all almost died. These men had looked the tiger in the eye that night only to fly home to America and get ripped apart by a swarm of crazy people.

Then he pushed his feelings aside. They were still under the hammer, and they all had to stay focused if they wanted to avoid the same fate. The men raised their goggles.

Williams pulled on a pair of latex gloves. "I'll get their tags."

Wade heard a sound and froze. Then, he heard it again—a moan.

The men readied their weapons.

"Let's get out of here, Sergeant," Wade said.

Ramos shook his head. They had to check for survivors.

The sergeant raised his shotgun as a soldier stumbled out of one of the patient rooms. Wade gasped. Lieutenant Harris, pale from loss of blood, had one hand shoved down his pants. His crotch was covered with a massive red stain.

Ramos lowered his gun. "It's all good, LT. We'll get you out of here."

Ford looked as if he might cry. "What did they do to him?"

Wade knew. They all knew.

Eraserhead opened his medical kit. "I got this."

Harris pulled his hand out of his pants and flung a spray of blood.

The soldiers lurched away sputtering. Harris roared with laughter and stuffed his hand down his pants again. *"Hey! You want some more of the good stuff?"*

Ramos shot the man in the face. He growled and spat.

Wade touched his cheek. Blood on his gloves.

Infected blood.

He raised his weapon at the same time as the others.

## THIRTEEN.

---

**T**HE OFFICE TOWER was going down. Most of it, anyway. A giant piece wrenched clear and slid off in a biblical cloud of smoke and dust.

Prince ground his teeth. For him, that building symbolized everything. America's strength reduced to rubble. His own impotence to stop it. The plague was stripping away everything that gave him a sense of self worth: his family, his command, his country.

"What did you find out?" he barked at Walker.

"I had an RTO perform a quick radio check with our special weapons and air units," the major reported. "I don't think that's us."

Prince glared at the man, his chest burning. "What in God's name are you talking about?"

"That's not us, sir. It's not our mortars or air units doing the shooting."

"Are you an idiot, Major? Of course it's not us. That's heavy artillery. Battlefield howitzers. Not mortars. It's the National Guard. A unit from the 101st Field Artillery. I would expect even you to recognize the difference."

Walker reddened. "My bad, sir."

The colonel growled. "I'll do it myself." He turned and yelled at the Massachusetts Army National Guard liaison, "Hey, McDonald! What is that?"

The young lieutenant blanched. He put down the magazine he was reading and stood at attention. "What is what, Colonel?"

Prince stabbed his finger at the screen. "Some of your people caught the Bug and just blew up an office building on live television! Do you think you might want to do something about it?"

"Uh, yes, sir." The pale liaison turned to his radio and worked the dials.

"We're supposed to be helping people," Prince screamed at him, "not destroying their last fucking ounce of hope!"

Across the trailer, the support personnel hunched even lower over their workstations. Prince paced in front of the TV like a lion tired of its cage. He was sick of playing defense. He wanted to take the initiative on something, anything.

Military personnel were catching the Bug. It was bad enough soccer moms were running around hacking up their neighbors with meat cleavers. The average soldier was capable of killing large numbers of people. If America stopped believing the Army would protect them, it'd be every man for himself out there. Game over.

On the screen, a second building was being shelled, a large hotel. They were hitting it with high-explosive incendiaries—white phosphorous. Several floors were already engulfed in chemical fire, pumping out rolling clouds of dense white smoke.

Big Brother was going to have Prince's head, but that no longer mattered. If there were people inside, they were being burned alive. He had to stop it.

*Conventional doctrine, aggressive action, flawless execution.* That was his motto, and it had served him well during twenty years of service to the people and the Constitution of the United States. Though conventional thought and flawless execution had gone out the window, he still had aggressive action as a card to play. He could at least do that.

He wanted to do *something*. Something real. Something with results. His exhausted, throbbing brain had stopped cooperating. It was time to make some decisions from the gut.

"What do we have that can take out those Nasty Girls?" Prince asked, using Army slang to describe the National Guard.

"Our air assets are all tied up," Walker said.

"Untie them. Get me something that can fly and shoot."

"Sir, are you saying we should engage a Massachusetts Army National Guard unit?"

"An *infected* unit. And yes, that's exactly what I'm saying, Major. We'll use the Apaches to track them by radar, confirm they're infected, and destroy them."

"Sir, I feel it's my duty to point out we're in a rather delicate situation with the Governor."

Prince had never wanted to punch a man so badly in his life. "*Delicate?*"

"Yes, sir."

"We're going to protect the man and his family and ensure Massachusetts has a government next week. What's so delicate about that?"

"He won't come, sir. He's still holed up at Logan International Airport, surrounded by state police and Guard. He's running the government from there."

"Did you tell him the President of the United States declared a state of emergency? That's why we're here helping him keep whatever he has left from washing away."

"He says he declared martial law, Colonel."

"Good! We're all on the same page! So what's the problem?"

"He just declared all Federal units on Massachusetts soil to be under state control. He says our command is now subordinate to Major General Brock."

The news struck Prince speechless for a moment. The situation had just changed so dramatically it gave him a sense of vertigo.

Based at Camp Edward in Cape Cod, Major General Brock commanded the Massachusetts Army National Guard, eight thousand strong. Prince considered Brock a dependable soldier and a solid brother officer. National Guard units were scattered all over Boston, and they shared communications and even staged joint operations with Prince's battalion.

After declaring a state of emergency, the President had nationalized all Guard units, putting them under Federal control. But with the new order, the Governor was putting Prince's battalion under Brock.

Prince glanced across the tactical operations center at the National Guard liaison sitting in front of a radio and talking to his counterpart. "What's Brock going to do?"

Walker shook his head and shrugged. "Hell of a time to secede, though."

The last thing Prince wanted was a shooting war against an entire brigade of National Guard. His eight hundred lightfighters were no longer in any condition for that kind of fight. And the rest of Tenth Mountain was committed. There was no help available from the outside.

But he had his orders. That, and there was no way he was going to take orders from the Governor; his boss was the President of the United States. "Major, I want you to draw up a contingency operational plan for doing a snatch grab on the Governor. In and out and with no blood spilled. I want to know what kind of assets we have and what kind of assets he has. Last time I checked, Massachusetts was still one of the fifty states."

"Are you sure that's wise, sir?"

"I'm sure it's an order, Major."

"Roger that, sir."

"Outstanding attitude. Get me eyes on that arty unit and on that airport. As in now."

"I'll get on it right away."

"And pull Harry Lee out of the field. I need my S-2." He regarded Walker with disdain. "He's the only officer I've got with a clear head and a pair of balls."

## FOURTEEN.

---

LATHERED IN SWEAT. Eyes wild. Pulse pounding at a heart attack pace.

The soldiers screamed at each other to lower their guns.

They were making enough noise to bring the entire hospital down on their heads. Soon, the Klowns would come howling through the doors.

Wade scanned the faces. Nobody was infected. Yet.

He looked at the weapons. There was enough firepower to fill the air with metal in seconds. The sergeant's combat shotgun was fixed on Williams's chest. The Sledgehammer was loaded with twelve-gauge shells—high-velocity buckshot. On full auto, the gun fired five rounds per second, emptying its twenty-round drum in about four seconds and destroying anything in its path.

Wade remembered something Ramos had said to him in Afghanistan: *The gun calls to be used.* He lowered his carbine. "Okay, okay. Listen."

The others ignored him.

"Come on, guys. Put them down."

Rapid shotgun blasts caught Williams in the chest and threw him down the hall. Surprised, Wade fell backward and landed on a bloody pile of arms and legs.

Ford snapped two rounds into Eraserhead's arm and shoulder then put another three in the ceiling. Eraserhead laughed as the impact spun him around.

Wade looked up into the Sledgehammer's smoking barrel as Ramos took aim.

*This is it. Oh fuck, this is it—*

"BOOM!" the sergeant roared. Then he burst into laughter.

Ford swept his carbine toward Ramos.

The world exploded in a blinding flash of heat and light.

*Grenade—*

Ramos disappeared in the blast. Shrapnel ripped the walls apart. The concussion flung the bodies against the ceiling and dropped them like puzzle pieces. Wade was lifted and spun through the air. He landed hard on his side and curled into a fetal ball among the dead.

Bare feet splashed past, hairy legs. Infected looking to play.

He shut his eyes and didn't move. His body hurt everywhere. If he had an open wound, even a cut, he was as good as dead.

*Man down,* he thought.

Wade sat up with a jolt. He reached for his carbine by reflex but couldn't find it. He patted his body, checking for wounds. His armor had caught some shrapnel. He was going to have a lot of bruises, and his ears were still ringing at high volume, but he seemed to be okay.

Ramos lay a few feet away, his hands twitching and his armor pockmarked and smoking. Ford gasped from a ragged chest wound. Eraserhead was in even worse

shape with one arm blown off.

Wade knew he should pinch off Eraserhead's artery to keep him from bleeding out, lash a tourniquet around the upper part of the limb, and slap a Kerlix bandage onto the stump. He should stab Ford's chest with an angiocatheter to release air and keep the man's lungs from collapsing. Then get both of them a Medevac.

Wade didn't move. The men were splattered in blood. Blood crawling with live virus.

He'd seen microscope images of the Bug in one of the endless PowerPoint presentations the Brass was always sending down to the front-line troops. The Bug looked like little worms that lived in bodily fluids, seeking out the brain and its fertile tissues, where it fed.

The men lying in that hallway were his friends. They were wounded.

*I'm going to help.*

He did nothing.

He would die for them. If given the chance, they would have died for him.

Still he did nothing.

Ramos pushed himself up onto one elbow and coughed blood onto the floor. Half his face grinned at Wade. The other half looked like hamburger burning on a grill.

Of all of them, Ramos had the biggest reason to walk away from all this. Go over the hill, go Elvis, desert. Boston was his hometown. The man's sister lived not far from the Air Force facility the battalion was using as a forward operating base. She and her kid lived in constant fear with their furniture stacked against the front door of their apartment. The squad went out there regularly with Ramos to check on them and deliver groceries and water.

But Ramos had stayed. It wasn't just that he was true blue Army, one of the gung-ho mo-fos. Wade knew the man believed that every time he put down one of the infected, Maria and little Thomas Flores were a bit safer.

The sergeant would never see his family again.

*"Gonna make a hole."* Ramos held up his knife. *"Make it wide."*

Wade looked around for a weapon but saw nothing that could help him.

Ramos struggled to his feet. He swayed, chuckling softly. His one good eye burned with hilarity and malice.

Wade remembered his last conversation with Beth. She'd been under the control of the Bug, but she was still in there. He could still reach her.

"Think about your family, Sergeant."

Ramos doubled over choking with laughter. He vomited more blood.

"Thank about Maria. Think about Thomas."

Ramos took off his helmet and dropped it among the dead. He ran his bloody hand across his crew cut and licked the edge of his knife. *"I'm gonna make you one of us."*

## FIFTEEN.

---

CAPTAIN HARRY LEE had learned a lot during his tour of Boston. His Humvee had the bullet holes to prove it. The windshield had been cracked by an axe. The doors bore the scars of a run-in with a chainsaw.

He sat on the passenger side in front of a stack of radios, consulting a map that revealed the strategic situation at a glance. He used one of the radios to talk to base and the other to communicate with the escort vehicles. The map had an overlay of clear film, on which he'd drawn all known blue forces in the area with a wax pencil. Next to him, Staff Sergeant Michael Murphy, a large wad of dip tucked into his cheek, spit into a cup and kept his eyes on the road.

With his handsome face and square jaw, Captain Lee looked like a World War Two movie hero. One expected to see him charging a machine gun nest on a Pacific island in some grainy black-and-white film. The overall impression people got from him was *fierce*, though he rarely lost his cool. It was his eyes; when he became angry, his gray eyes bored right through you.

Two Humvees rolled in their wake, carrying a squad of handpicked shooters from HQ Company. These same guys had escorted Lee to endless parleys with village elders in Afghanistan and on more than a few field trips deep into the bush. At first, they'd bitched that he was always dragging them into the shit, but now they followed him around like a pack of loyal bloodhounds. They looked up to Lee as a father figure and imitated his cool. They would kill for him, and they would die for him. With that kind of devotion came a special kind of responsibility because for Lee, the mission always came first, and he would do anything to achieve it.

Lee was the battalion S-2, or intelligence officer. Intelligence assessment was critical to mission planning, but the situation was fluid, and he didn't like what he'd been getting from the field. He'd toured the city in a helicopter and had seen hell below. Then he took three Humvees out into the field to see what was happening on the ground.

He'd seen, all right. He'd seen things he'd never forget. And he'd come to a disturbing realization, one that confirmed his suspicions—and worst fears—about what was happening.

Military and civilian authorities had lost control of Boston.

"A lot of cars ahead," Foster called down from the Humvee's cupola.

Lee saw them. The cars weren't moving, which meant the Humvee would have to slow down and possibly stop. "Stay frosty." He radioed the same message to his escorts.

"It's a traffic jam," Foster added. "No way through."

Murphy already had a map spread across the steering wheel. "If we turn at this next intersection, it'll take us right back to Massachusetts Avenue."

That was a November Golf—a no go. The civilian population had lost faith in the military after the power failed and, in open defiance of the ongoing curfew, had tried to flee the city in anything that moved. A huge number of refugees had been caught out in the open; the infected must have thought it was Christmas. Most of the arteries leading out of the city had been turned into parking lots strewn with abandoned luggage and the unlucky dead.

“There’s always Garden Street,” Murphy added.

They were trying to reach the Harvard University campus. Several buildings there had been commandeered by Bravo Company as an operating base. Harvard was the last stop on Lee’s tour. Once he reached it and refueled, he’d be able to work his way onto Fresh Pond Parkway and take it to Concord Turnpike, routes that had been blocked off for military and emergency vehicle use. Those roads would get him and his boys most of the way back to Hanscom Airbase.

“Cut through the park,” Lee ordered. “Stick to the pedestrian paths.”

Murphy smirked. “I hadn’t thought of that. It’s funny, I still keep thinking this is America, and you can’t just drive a Humvee through a park without special permission.”

“Times have changed, Mike.”

Murphy turned the wheel. “Roger that.”

What started as a daytrip had turned into three, each marked by traffic jams and random attacks, with the attacks growing more frequent by the hour. The infection rate had become geometric; it wasn’t going to be long before the crazies outnumbered the rest of the population here. They already far outnumbered the military forces in the area. The only reason Boston hadn’t already become a complete madhouse was that, while the crazies enjoyed infecting their victims, they liked killing them even more.

The only answer was withdrawal. Give up Boston. Game over.

That, or extermination. Get some armor. Announce a curfew. Put Bradleys and Humvees on every street, Apaches in the air, and have them shoot everything in sight. Totally clean house.

The Colonel, of course, wouldn’t hear of it. It was against doctrine. The U.S. Army had given up the initiative early in the game. The infected had become the most dedicated, deadly enemy the Army had ever faced. But doctrine still regarded the crazies as sick civilians.

The civilian leadership and the Big Green Machine would realize what had to be done at some point, but by then, it would be too late, if it weren’t already. So instead of concentrating overwhelming force and doing what needed doing, the battalion remained dispersed in small formations, trying to maintain law and order while getting chewed up for it.

*Imagine you deploy an army on a series of hills. From there, you command the region. Then a flood comes. The hills become islands, and your army commands nothing but the ground it’s standing on. And the waters keep rising...*

The Humvees drove past trees from which a grisly collection of bodies hung by their necks. Men, women, children. In the distance, a group of laughing women roasted a flayed corpse on a spit over an open fire. One wore a helmet that once belonged to an infantryman.



They waved and flashed their breasts as the Humvees passed.

"Can I light them up?" Foster yelled, yanking the charging handle on his heavy machine gun.

"Don't waste the ammo."

"It's time for some payback, Captain."

Lee shook his head. With the Taliban, payback had meant something. Killing the infected for payback was like punching a shelf after you accidentally slammed your head against it. The shelf wouldn't care, and you'd probably just hurt yourself.

Murphy growled, "Give it a rest, Foster. You'll see more action soon enough. We need you to stay alert up there."

"Wilco, Staff Sergeant."

The little convoy drove the rest of the way through the park without incident.

"I got some family here," Murphy said after a while. "Distant relatives."

"I didn't know," Lee said.

The big staff sergeant shrugged.

"Are they okay? Have you heard anything?"

"No."

"If they're on our route, we could stop and check on them." It was an offer Lee would not have made to anyone else.

"Right now, sir, I'm focused on getting back to Hanscom alive." Murphy spit into his cup. "We weren't close or anything, but I'd visit them from time to time. I liked coming here. You know, it used to be a really nice town."

Lee knew he should say something earnest about it becoming a great city again once they completed their mission. The streets would be packed with people and traffic, and the Red Sox would play again at Fenway Park. But he couldn't. He said nothing.

At that moment, he realized he'd lost faith in their ability to win this war.

Murphy sighed and nodded as if he'd read the captain's mind. "Yeah."

"We're still here," Lee said. "We won't lose it all."

It was more a vow than a prediction.

## **SIXTEEN.**

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**S**COTT WADE knew he was going to die in this hospital.

He'd survived horrific battles against the Taliban over the past year. Only once had he truly been convinced he was going to be killed. After it became clear the Americans were pulling out to fight a new war, the Taliban, still fighting the old war, staged an all-out assault on Combat Outpost Katie. They wanted American bodies and weapons as trophies to show off. They could then claim they'd driven out the infidels.

In a night attack, the Taliban took out the gun placements in the tower with rocket-propelled grenades. Soviet-era heavy machine guns rattled along the ridges. The red sparks of tracer rounds blurred across the rocks. A stray rocket blew up the fuel truck and drenched the compound in fire. The ammo in a burning Humvee began to cook and pop at intervals.

The first two waves of fighters blew themselves up on the claymores. The rest raced to the walls. They threw grenades and emptied their AK-47s.

The platoon threw everything they had at them. The air filled with hot metal flying in all directions. After Guzman toppled with a smoking hole in his helmet, Wade took over his M240 machine gun and returned fire until the barrel got so hot it began to melt.

Apache gunships approached but didn't engage, the soldiers afraid of killing American troops. Outpost Katie replied if the helicopters didn't start dropping ordnance, they were going to be overrun. The Apaches opened up with their chain guns. After this pounding, the guerillas melted away into the mountains while the gunships pursued like angry wasps and mopped up the stragglers.

Wade had been wounded in three places on his left arm. Bravo Company's medic performed some quick field surgery and told him he didn't rate a medevac. The next day, the company struck its colors and drove down to Kabul, which was in chaos due to the plague, then flew out of the Sandbox to Vicenza, Italy. Then to Fort Drum in New York State. Then to Boston.

To Christ Hospital, where, ironically, he was going to die.

As far as he knew, most of his platoon had already been wiped out. He didn't have a weapon. Pain lanced through his ankle. His left leg could barely take his weight. His right trembled with exhaustion. He was on the fifth floor of a large building filled with thousands of homicidal maniacs. And one of the best soldiers he'd ever known wanted to stab him to death.

Ramos lurched over the corpses. Wade wondered what was holding the man together. Half his face was gone. He moved jerkily, like a puppet.

Wade limped down the corridor and pushed the stairwell door open. He looked down and heard echoing sounds of struggle. Stomping feet. Shouts. Laughter. From

outside, he could hear the hammering of the fifty-cal machine guns mounted on the Humvees.

Nowhere to go but up.

He grit his teeth and pulled his body up the stairs one step at a time.

Behind him, the door slammed open.

*"An Army of one, motherfucker!"*

Wade kept climbing. He finally came to a roof exit and prayed it was unlocked.

The door opened with a squeak of the hinges. He cried with relief and stepped outside.

Bright sunshine washed over him. The light flickered as a squadron of Apache gunships roared past, bristling with their low-slung chain guns. They weren't part of his mission. He had no way to contact them.

Wade paused to catch his breath. The view struck him. Parts of Boston were on fire. He smelled smoke. The ever-present sirens had fallen silent, replaced by a distant chorus of screams and laughter. The epidemic had reached some tipping point. After weeks of endless struggle, the military had finally lost control.

Behind him, the door banged open. Ramos staggered from the dark opening as relentless as the Terminator. He laughed with red teeth. He still held his pig-sticker. *"Get some."*

Wade backed away until he reached the edge of the roof. Far below, he saw the fifty-cals rocking on the Humvees. The gunners stood hunched behind the heavy machine guns, blasting away at the hospital entrance.

He had nowhere to go. He was going to have to fight. That, or jump to his death.

Then he spotted a maintenance ladder. He hoped it ran down the length of the building. It was a chance he had to take.

The pain in his foot nearly blinded him when he tried to move again. Ramos laughed, terrifyingly close. Wade didn't look behind. Instead, he doubled his pace, crying out in pain. He gripped the ladder rails and began to climb down, favoring his right foot.

The ladder reached all the way to the ground. At the halfway point, Wade looked up and saw his sergeant's grimacing face at the top. He resumed his downward climb. The sergeant wasn't following. Wade knew he was going to make it.

His body tingled as the shadow fell over him. He heard rags of clothing flapping in the wind. Something was coming at him—fast.

It was Ramos. Wade hugged the ladder as the sergeant flew past. He cried out as searing pain ripped across his face.

Ramos kept falling, laughing all the way, until his body smashed against the asphalt.

Wade pulled off his glove and touched his cheek. His fingers came away red. He was wounded. His entire face hurt like a son of a bitch. Blood poured down his neck. Ramos had jumped and sliced him on the way down, cutting Wade's cheek wide open.

Wade remembered seeing him lick the knife. *I've got the Bug!* His mind blanked out with fear. He counted the seconds.

Nothing happened.

*I'm okay. I'm okay. Please let me be okay.*

He knew the surviving members of the platoon would be frantically trying to contact Lieutenant Harris. The idea that they might give up and bug out, leaving him there, terrified him even more than the possibility of infection.

He hurried the rest of the way down and limped toward the vehicles, waving his arms. Halfway there, he collapsed with a groan.

A figure knelt next to him. A panicked face came into focus. Corporal McIsaac.

"Fuck, it's Wade."

"Goddamn. Look at him."

"Help me get him into the Humvee."

Wade heard the metallic crack of an M4.

"Move it! I'll cover forward!"

Wade glimpsed a horde of gleeful men and women—naked or dressed in the rags of hospital gowns—pouring out of the entrance of the hospital. They waved and clapped as the fifties tore them apart.

He grimaced as somebody squirted antiseptic onto—

—*the Bug*—

—his wound and slapped a bandage onto it.

"What do you see?" Wade croaked. *Worms? Little crawling worms?*

McIsaac patted his chest. "It'll need stitches."

Hands lifted him. The sun burned into his eyes as he was half carried, half dragged across the parking lot and shoved into one of the vehicles. He couldn't stop crying.

"Let's move!"

"Jaworski! Mount up!"

The Humvee lurched forward. The gunner stood next to Wade, his head and shoulders above the roof so he could work the machine gun. Empty shell casings rained into the vehicle and rattled across the roof. Wade heard the *whump* of a Mark 19 on another Humvee as it spit grenades into the hospital emergency room. Glass sprayed across the parking lot.

The hospital entrance was obscured by smoke and dust. The lightfighters cheered.

"We're out of here!"

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "Hang in there, Wade. You're okay now."

"What happened?" the driver yelled. "Where's the rest of your team?"

"They're all dead."

"What? Are we going back?"

Wade shook his head. He felt dizzy. "They're all dead."

"What are the Tomcats doing here?"

"Do they see us?"

Wade glanced out the window in time to see the squadron of Apaches launch batteries of Hellfire missiles from their stub-wing pylons.

"Holy shit! Go, go, go!"

Guided by advanced radar systems, the Hellfires rocketed into the hospital with an aerosol roar and burst with a flash.

The ground trembled under the rig's wheels. Wade felt the air around him suck toward the blast. Brilliant white light washed out his vision. His ears filled with terrifying booms. The sensation was like getting struck by lightning.

The gunner dropped into the vehicle. "Just go, just go, just go!"

They were too close to the blast. Debris rained around the Humvees.

"Just—"

Something big struck the vehicle with a *CLANG*. The windshield cobwebbed. The vehicle rocked and swerved. Hot oil sprayed from the crumpled hood. The engine howled. The driver fought for control. The gunner screamed.

Wade was flung into darkness.

## SEVENTEEN.

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**H**ARVARD UNIVERSITY was comprised of numerous old buildings situated on a two-hundred-acre campus in Cambridge, just three and a half miles northwest of downtown Boston. Before the Bug, the institution of higher learning had been one of the most prestigious in the world. School was currently out of session. Possibly forever.

Harvard had become home to elements of Bravo Company. They occupied a cluster of buildings in the northwest corner of campus, protected from the street by an iron rail fence. Captain Marsh had established his headquarters at the center, in Holden Chapel.

The campus was Bravo's third outpost in as many weeks. The battalion was steadily being pushed out of the downtown core as the area became virtually overrun with crazies.

It was the last stop on Captain Lee's tour.

The Humvees pulled up to the iron pedestrian gate and parked. Lee's shooters spilled out of the other Humvees and surrounded the vehicles, weapons at the ready.

Lee tried to see into the windows, but the shades were drawn. "See anything?"

"Nothing," Murphy responded. "We're driving on fumes. I hope they're still here."

"I hope they don't have the Bug," Foster called down.

"If they had the Bug, we'd be dead already," Murphy said. "Pay attention up there."

"Contact!" said Foster. "Target, two hundred meters."

Lee got out of the vehicle and aimed down Massachusetts Avenue through his carbine's close-combat optic. He couldn't see anything past the obstacle course of smashed cars that blocked the way ahead and had turned the street beyond into a parking lot.

"I count nine, ten of them," Foster reported. "They're running right at us."

Lee saw them now. Escapees from one of the fever clinics, naked or dressed in paper gowns and carrying makeshift weapons—tire irons, garden shears, kitchen knives. A woman snapped a pair of scissors in each hand. A grinning man with a hairy chest lugged a gas can and a lighter.

They were all smiling and shouting and waving at the soldiers. "*Wait up! Wait for me!*"

"Private Foster, once the hostiles clear those wrecks, you are cleared to engage," Lee said.

"Now we're talking!" Foster aimed his heavy machine gun. "Gonna kill some motherfuckers!"

Lee glanced at Murphy, who shook his head. The fifty-cal hammered. The path of the rounds, illuminated by bright tracers, flew over the mob. Foster corrected, walking his fire into the infected.

The battle was over in seconds. The torn bodies of the infected lay in the street like road kill.

"For such a gung-ho mo-fo, you can't shoot for shit, Foster," Murphy said.

The private said nothing. He wore a vacant smile, happy to have had the chance to use his big gun against a legitimate target.

Some of the soldiers didn't feel remorse about killing the infected. The older generation liked to blame the younger for embracing violence due to rap songs and video games. Lee believed some people just didn't have much in the empathy department. At the moment, he was glad people like that were on his side.

Lee felt remorse. A lot, but he buried it. The mission came first.

A voice called, "Coming out!"

Three soldiers scurried out of the one of the dormitory buildings while a fourth provided overwatch at the door. They opened the gate.

One of them waved and said, "Hurry the fuck up before we all get killed." He noticed Lee's rank and added quickly, "Sir!"

Lee and his men jogged through the gate and into the building.

Captain Marsh welcomed them in the dining hall with a scowl. "Captain Lee, this is a bag of dicks," he said, using the popular Army term for a horrible situation. "It's the mother of all bags of dicks. You're the battalion S-2. What the hell is going on?"

Lee looked around. The soldiers of Bravo Company glared back at him. All of them were geared up in full battle rattle, as if they expected the crazies to come howling through the door at any moment. The air was tense. They were scared.

"We're losing Boston," Lee said. "What else do you want to know?"

Marsh nodded. "We lost contact with Second Platoon. They were assigned on a fragmentation order when we pulled back yesterday, and they've disappeared. Any word?"

Lee shook his head.

"Any idea why the Colonel put the nix on Operation Mercy?"

"Can't help you there, either."

Marsh said, "If our intelligence officer doesn't know jack, then I guess we're really in the dark."

"What was the fragmentary order?" Lee asked. "You seem to be sealed up tight. What's your mission here?"

"Staying alive, Captain. Other than that, not a lot. We were ordered to stand down, stay concealed and observe. If it looks like the neighborhood is starting to get crowded, we're supposed to pull back again, toward Hanscom."

"Who issued the order?"

"Major Walker."

Walker was the XO, the Colonel's right-hand man. The orders were legit, but it made no sense.

Lee said, "The strategy's changed, but I've received no word of it."

"We're under the hammer here. We're low on everything—ammo, food, you name it. We need rest and refit. We need a fucking plan. Fighting the crazies sucks. Hiding is worse. I need to get out there and find my missing boys."

"I'm on my way back to HQ. I'll try to get some answers. Something's not right."

“Something else isn’t right. On the other side of the Charles River is Harvard Stadium, a refugee camp with a couple thousand people. There was an MP platoon there to help keep order and distribute resources, but they were ordered out. The camp has been turned into a casualty collection point. Apparently, running the place is now the job of a mixed unit of First Battalion’s casualties. Has been for a few days. A lot of them aren’t fit for duty.”

Lee shook his head. “Get me some gas, and I’ll be on my way to find out what the hell is going on. I’ll make finding your boys my top priority once I’m back on base.”

Marsh offered his hand for a shake. “I appreciate anything you can do, Captain.”

One thing Lee knew for sure. Marsh’s men weren’t holding ground. They were waiting for a siege. It was dangerous. They weren’t projecting power onto their area of operations, and they weren’t bugging out either.

The whole thing suggested a big shift in strategy. Lee was used to increasingly erratic thinking at the top, but not from Lt. Colonel Prince. The man was predictable.

But Prince followed orders. Maybe it wasn’t his strategy.

Maybe the Brass was preparing to pull the military out of the cities.



## ***EIGHTEEN.***

---

**T**HE HELLFIRES had beautiful effect on target. The drone footage showed an aerial view of helicopters hovering in front of a large hospital, which exploded outward in a titanic blast.

Lt. Colonel Prince shook his pill bottle and heard the rattle of his last Advil. He slapped the capsule into his palm and knocked it back. He needed something stronger to dull the throbbing pain in his head. Much stronger.

The first wave of missiles ripped away the shell. The next brought it down. It was like watching a building get pounded into rubble by a giant's fists. After that, the Apaches fired incendiary rockets to burn up anything still alive in the wreckage.

"Major Walker," Prince said.

His XO was talking to one of the radio operators in hushed tones.

"Major!" Prince roared. "Un-ass that radio and get over here."

The ability of the Army to function depended on following orders, explicit orders carefully designed by the chain of command. Sometimes, the orders sucked.

The alternative—to disobey—was far worse, particularly in a crisis like this. In the end, without discipline, they wouldn't be an army. They'd turn into a rabble on a slippery slope to helping destroy what they sought to protect.

Walker stiffened and approached, looking pale and frazzled. The man was terrified of something.

Prince hesitated; he'd never seen fear wipe the smug look off his XO's face. "Major, our aviation unit is engaging the targets designated in Operation Mercy."

"Yes, sir."

"The OPORD specifically required boots on the ground."

"Using the Tomcats accomplished the objective with less risk."

"So you showed independent initiative."

"That's right, sir."

"Outstanding, Major."

"Thank you, sir."

"Outstanding, Major, as in you are an outstanding fucking idiot."

Walker flinched.

Prince continued. "Do you realize you just destroyed four civilian buildings? Deploying air assets I wanted to use against an arty unit that was doing the exact same thing? Air assets we need to bring in the Governor?"

"Sir, it was the best—"

"Are you also aware we are at the screaming edge with General Brock, who might not take kindly to wholesale destruction of city property? Do you know what the optics are on something like this? It looks like we declared war on the American people!"

"That doesn't—"

"Did you at least evacuate any medical staff still on site, or did you just kill uninfected civilians? Doctors, for Christ's sake—"

"We contacted each hospital and instructed them—"

"The whole world's going to see this when CNN gets a hold of it!"

"There's not going to be a CNN tomorrow!" Walker exploded.

All work in the command post came to a halt. The staff stared at them in wonder.

Prince blinked in surprise. For all his faults, the major thrived on order. He was loyal. He never lost his cool. He was too damned logical. He certainly never questioned Prince in front of the enlisted men under his command.

Prince tilted his head toward a corner of the room, where they could speak in relative privacy. Walker followed him there.

Prince said, "You'd better explain yourself, Major, because I'm about to land on you with both boots."

"That city out there isn't Boston anymore. It's not even Afghanistan. It's worse than Afghanistan. We need to change our thinking, or we're done."

Prince smoldered while the staff officers and sergeants continued to stare. He hated backtalk. He took it from Captain Lee, but he respected Lee. "Major Walker, I understand your concerns. We are overextended. But it's not up to you. It's not up to me. We have our orders. Having independent initiative to implement orders doesn't mean you get to ignore them."

"We've lost control of almost every single major city in the country, Colonel. We need to start thinking about taking care of ourselves."

"What are you saying? We should mutiny?"

"I'm saying the optics don't matter anymore. The infected artillery unit doesn't matter. The Governor doesn't matter. Going after them is just going to dig our hole deeper. The situation is changing by the hour now. We need to think about accomplishing our primary mission at the least amount of risk. We need to start thinking about the probability of collapse."

Prince frowned. "Collapse." He winced, as if the word tasted like crap. "*Collapse*."

"Across the board. I've been in contact with other units around the—"

"Are you saying we should pull out of Boston and give it to the infected wrapped in a bow?"

Walker held his ground. "Affirmative."

Prince growled, "We're done here."

"Sir, if we don't—"

"Not another word, or I'll relieve you. I swear to Christ, I'll shoot you myself for cowardice. I'll shoot you in the fucking head."

A soldier burst into the trailer, laughing and crying. The staff sergeants leaped out of their chairs and backed away.

"I resign!" the man screamed. "I'm going Elvis!"

Prince pulled his 9mm from its holster and flicked the safety lever. Several men stood in his way. "Make a hole!"

Another enlisted man ran into the trailer, grabbed the first man, and pulled him out.

Prince, burning with rage, started to follow.

Walker blocked his path. "The man was just drunk, sir."

For every physical casualty, there were two psychiatric ones. But it was no excuse.

"Get out of my way, Major."

"I'll get him squared away, sir."

"You're relieved. Get the fuck out of my sight."

"Sir, there's one more thing you need to know."

"Be thankful I don't throw you off the base and let the crazies have you."

"Sir, listen to me. We've lost contact with Big Brother."

The red mist dissipated. Prince's headache returned full force. "What?"

"We've lost contact with Colonel Armstrong's command."

## NINETEEN.

---

SERGEANT RAMOS, half his face turned into hamburger and billowing smoke, grinned at him with the other half and showed him the pig-sticker he kept in his boot.

Wade awoke, gasping for air.

A soldier in ragged fatigues jumped back as Wade lunged upright.

"You were screaming, bro," the soldier said. "Bad for morale."

"He means shut the fuck up," another soldier barked, lying against the wall.

Wade heard the distant babble of thousands of voices. He was hot. Sweat was pouring off him. His face ached and itched. He was lying on the carpet of some type of office. From the trophies and pennants that decorated the place, he guessed the occupant to be a football coach.

A few soldiers sat smoking in chairs or on the floor. They were from Tenth Mountain, but Wade didn't recognize anybody from Bravo Company.

He touched the bulky bandage on his face. His vision blurred. He was gone again.

Sometime later, a woman's asked, "You want some water?"

Wade opened his eyes and drank deep from the offered canteen.

"You're all right," she said. The woman was slim and athletic-looking, pretty except for the black eye and massive bruise on the left side of her face.

"Who are you?" he croaked.

She smiled, displaying some broken teeth. "Sergeant Sandra Rawlings. 164th Transportation Battalion. Alpha Company, the Muleskinners. Massachusetts Guard."

"Where's my platoon?"

"Can't help you there, soldier."

"Wade. Private First Class Scott Wade. Bravo Company."

"First Battalion, Tenth Mountain, right. You look like you were in the shit. Somebody brought you here, and now here you are."

"What is this place?"

"I'll give you the nickel tour." She held up a knife. "First, the special orientation."

Wade stared at the knife. He saw Ramos holding it, leering down with his Klown face.

*Gonna make a hole. Make it wide.*

"If you touch me without permission, I'll cut off your balls," Rawlings said. "And if you ever get the drop on me, you'd better kill me after. Understand?"

He gaped at the knife twirling in her hand.

*I'm going to make you one of us.*

*BOOM! Ha, ha!*

"Jesus, Rawlings, give the guy a break," one of the soldiers said.

She put the knife away and studied Wade with concern. "You okay?"

He blinked. "No."

She offered her hand. "Let's get you that nickel tour."

Wade let her help him up. He felt unsteady on his feet. His ankle still hurt from the fight at the hospital. He was bruised everywhere from the Humvee crash. A little dizzy, he wondered if he'd suffered a mild concussion.

Rawlings swept her hand across one of the big picture windows. "Harvard Stadium."

The U-shaped stadium offered a majestic view of the playing field and stands. The field was covered in tents. Thousands of people milled around them. A safety shelter.

"It's something to see, huh?" Rawlings grinned. "Home of Harvard's football team. Janis Joplin performed her last show here in 1970. It's where The Game is played."

"You mean football?"

"The *Game*, Wade. Harvard versus Yale. You're not from around here, are you?"

"I'm from Wisconsin."

"Never been there." She shook her head. "I've been to Iraq but not Wisconsin. Funny."

"Who's in charge here?"

"Down there? Nobody. You got Red Cross, some local government, charities and churches. Those people are shell shocked. Many of them are armed. And they're really pissed off."

"I need to report in and find my unit. Who's in command of this unit?"

"Nobody. You want the job, Wade?"

"Who's senior?"

Rawlings jerked her thumb toward the far corner of the room. "Him."

Wade turned and saw a sergeant lying in a fetal ball on the floor.

She said, "Don't know his name. He hasn't said a word since he got here."

"What is this? Why are we here?"

"I was guarding a truck that got thwacked. Ended up here by chance. As for you Tenth Mountain boys... Apparently, this is a casualty collection point. There are guys here from all over your battalion, some walking wounded, but mostly psychiatric casualties. Guys messed up in the head. Wounds that run deep. A few are catatonic. There are maybe thirty guys here in all."

Wade nodded at the massive crowds below. "And the mission is to protect them?"

"Our job is to stay alive, Wade. This building is the university's athletics department. We got views all around. We keep an eye on things. Helicopters drop food once a week. We go down there and get what we need at gunpoint. We let them sort out the rest on their own."

"Aren't we supposed to be distributing it or something?"

Rawlings snorted. "That sounds like a great way to get killed."

"What's it like down there?"

"Just what it looks like. A shithole. Every day, you got fistfights, murders, rape and shootings over women, beer, smokes. You ask me, it's a powder keg just waiting to go off. You got a weapon, cowboy?"

He shook his head. "Lost it."

"Ammo?"

"A few mags for my M4."

"We'll see about getting you armed. One more thing, Wade. Sleep every chance you get."

"Why is that?"

"Because somebody is always screaming in their sleep and waking everybody up." She sighed. "Those poor guys, the things they've seen and done... I don't want to know."

Wade studied her face. She really was pretty. "What happened to you, Sergeant?"

"You don't want to know."

## TWENTY.

---

L.T. COLONEL PRINCE closed the door to his private office in the command trailer and sat at his desk with his head in his hands. The migraine bloomed behind his eyes. He could hardly think. No amount of aspirin would help. What he needed was a long, long sleep.

Ignoring his desktop computer, which demanded his attention, he opened a drawer and scooped out a bottle of Jim Beam. He kept the bottle around for special occasions, to toast a promotion or observe the end of an operation. Sharing a shot always made the moment memorable. He wondered if drinking alone would have the opposite effect. What he needed now was to forget everything.

He put the bottle away without drinking. He had work to do. Still he didn't move. What was the point? Anything he did was just pushing a broom against an avalanche.

The radio/telephone operator had contacted Harry Lee. The captain was en route back to Hanscom. He'd seen some horrible things on his recon trip. The confidential report he'd transmitted stuck to the facts, but the story was clear enough. Boston was a lost cause.

Maybe Walker was right.

*Screw Walker.*

They still couldn't raise regimental HQ. Prince told them to jump the ladder and try Division at Fort Drum. Again, no response.

Prince had seen rough soldiering. He'd led his boys through some tough campaigns. But he always knew he had the full weight of the Big Green Machine behind him, a powerful military that projected American power across the planet. Not anymore.

The idea that Division headquarters had been overrun or compromised by infection was impossible to conceive. Fort Drum wasn't near any major cities. It was in the middle of nowhere in New York State. At first, he'd thought there must be something wrong with the communications system. But they were still able to contact other Tenth Mountain units. Those field units all reported the same problems getting through to central command.

What was the next step? Go still higher up? Call the Pentagon?

The Pentagon had been evacuated. The President and the Joint Chiefs were in their underground bunker at Mount Weather, making their erratic decisions without any knowledge of what was really happening on the ground.

Prince was going to have to make his own decisions. The right course eluded him. He knew the current strategy wasn't working, but he couldn't just pull his boys out of Boston and give up. More than six hundred thousand people had lived in the city before the plague. Another four million lived in the Greater Boston area. The survivors were desperate. They needed help.

If his lightfighters couldn't do anything, what good were they? Why bother?

He'd always thought the world would end suddenly. An asteroid would come, humanity would have a week to get its shit in order, and then BOOM.

He'd never imagined a plague would do the job, and with such horror. A plague in which everybody became an enemy, everything familiar became a threat, every loved one was perverted and defiled.

*Like Susan and Frankie. Your own family was shot down in the street like dogs by men wearing uniforms just like yours.*

Stars flared in his vision. He groaned.

He needed some creative thinking. Goddammit, he was going to have to get Walker back. But he'd get the man squared away first.

Prince was still rattled from their last encounter. Walker had the logic—and personality—of Mr. Spock and the loyalty of a bloodhound. If he'd lost enough faith to challenge a superior officer the way he had, he had to have a damned good reason. Or maybe he was just cracking under the stress. A lot of men did.

He opened the drawer and looked at the bottle. *Forget everything.* He closed it again.

Maybe he should appoint Lee as his XO. Lee was a straight shooter, and the man had balls. They'd destroy the rogue artillery unit that was terrorizing the Boston core and put the Governor in his place. They'd find a new strategy to check the spread of infection across the area and stop the violence.

They could do it. They still had a mission.

Somebody knocked on the door.

Prince touched the 9mm at his hip. "Come in."

The radio/telephone operator entered the room. "Good news, Colonel."

Prince stared at the man. He hadn't heard good news in over a month.

The RTO added, "We've established contact with regimental HQ."

"Outstanding, son." Prince stood and followed the man into the work area. For the first time in weeks, he started to feel like things were going his way. He picked up the headset. "Wizard Six. Over."

Armstrong roared, "WHAT IS YOUR FUCKING MALFUNCTION, JOE?"

Even though Colonel Armstrong couldn't see him, Prince stood at attention. He'd gotten such treatment before. Armstrong wasn't one to mince words; he called it "tough love." Clearly, the regimental commander knew about Prince's failures: the destruction of the hospitals, the Governor rejecting his offer of sanctuary, the infected rogue artillery unit bombing downtown, the steady losses of men and materiel...and his utter failure to achieve his mission. What could he say that would change the commander's opinion? That he was going to appoint a new XO?

He felt his optimism wash away like sand in the surf.

"DID YOU NOT HEAR ME? ARE YOU DEAF?"

"I heard you loud and clear, sir. Over." After a long silence, he added: "Sir?"

Armstrong exploded into insane laughter.

Prince blanched. "May I speak to your XO?"

*"That might be a little tough, Joe. I ate his tongue."* Again, that explosive, shrieking laughter came through the headset.



Prince terminated the connection. He went back into his private office and closed the door. He sat at his desk and ran his hands over his crew cut. *This is bad. This is really bad.* The chain of command was broken. First Battalion was officially off the reservation.

Another knock came at the door.

"Come in," he said mechanically. His head pounded to the tune of his rapid heartbeat.

Lieutenant Torres entered the room, looking pale. "Sir, I forwarded you a new PowerPoint file we just received from HQ. An advisory."

Prince shook his head. "Not now."

He was going to have to organize a mission to Troy to provide aid to HQ and help re-establish the chain of command. *With what? We're stretched to the breaking point.*

He'd work with the commanders of the other battalions. A joint mission. Then he frowned. Why the hell was HQ sending PowerPoint presentations? Didn't they know they had a major crisis on their hands?

"You need to see this, Colonel," Torres insisted.

Prince looked at the man's face. Torres was a tough son of a bitch, but he appeared to be on the verge of tears.

"This came from regimental HQ?" Prince asked.

"Yes, sir."

Prince located the file on his computer and opened it.

## TWENTY-ONE.

---

**T**HE FIRST SLIDE presented a title promising authorization guidelines for lethal use of force against armed civilians. That was bad enough, as it suggested some people had gotten so angry that they were taking shots at Army units in the field.

The second slide showed a photo of a severed head with a lit cigarette in its mouth. It wore a helmet. The eyes had been carved out and replaced with shiny pennies.

The third depicted a pile of hacked-off body parts and Tenth Mountain patches torn from uniforms.

Others displayed scenes of torture and murder. Laughing soldiers holding down their comrades and butchering them. Sodomy. A screaming head in a vise. A crying man with wires wrapped around his head, the wires leading back to a car battery. Another with a burning tire on his head.

One image showed a large crowd of infected soldiers in the dining facility, laughing and wrestling on the floor. Their uniforms were stained and ragged. Some fired their weapons into the ceiling. The leering cooks slopped chili into bowls in the chow line. A human foot protruded from one of the pots.

Prince closed the file and deleted it. He wished it was paper so he could burn it.

Then he went to call in an airstrike.

Oddly, his headache had disappeared.

## TWENTY-TWO.

---

WADE EXPLORED THE BUILDING. The other rooms, all of them offices adorned with sports paraphernalia, offered views of Boston. In one, three soldiers had opened a window to let in the air. They stood looking out at the skyline of South Boston.

The northeastern horizon was on fire. He felt the waves of heat, the tremors in the air. A distant roar, mingled with screams and laughter, carried on the wind. Twilight would come in an hour, but the sky was already blackening as a massive wall of ash and smoke roiled over the city.

Wade had missed a few things while he was out cold. The situation was deteriorating rapidly.

Helicopters roared out of the ash fall. Searchlights glared. Then they were gone.

A splash of gunfire sounded outside, somewhere close.

One of the soldiers lowered his binoculars and pointed. "I found him. There he is. See?"

The second responded, "I see him. Man, he's either infected, or he's lost it."

The third turned and noticed Wade. "Who are you?"

He introduced himself. The men were Gray, Fisher and Brown. They nodded in greeting. None appeared to be physically wounded, but Wade knew something inside them had broken.

"How's your face?" Fisher asked him. "You all right?"

Wade touched the wound. He could feel the fever heat through the bandage. His cheek tingled. *As if little worms were inside.* He felt as if his entire body had been crumpled up like a piece of aluminum foil and stretched out again.

He ignored the question. "What were you guys looking at?"

"Some Rambo type," Fisher said. "Armed to the teeth. He comes out every day around this time, shoots a few crazies and yells something like, 'Three o'clock and all's well.'"

It was well past three o'clock.

Gray looked out the window. "The fire's much bigger than it was this morning. Charlestown's going up. Bunker Hill. Spreading west fast. Boston's toast."

"It's on the other side of the river," Brown said. "We're good."

"You think? Well, Hanscom is on the other side of the river too. If the fire spreads through Cambridge, we could get cut off. I wonder how many people it's pushing out of the area. More crazies. All going west. They got nowhere else to go."

Fisher nodded. "We might have to think about bugging out soon."

"We'll talk to Rawlings about it," Brown said.

"Is she in charge here?" Wade asked. She wasn't Tenth Mountain, but she had the highest rank among the survivors here.

"You think these cowboys would take orders from a Nasty Girl?"

Wade turned. The sergeant was leaning against the doorjamb, arms crossed.

"I see you met my posse," she said.

Wade nodded. He wanted to ask her if they were going to bug out. He wanted to get back to his unit. Surely, some of the men in his platoon had survived, since they'd brought him there. He wanted to get back. Those guys were the only family he had left.

But he said nothing. He was still in shock and didn't have much fight in him. His body was pretty banged up. He needed to stay here and rest for a while longer. He also didn't want to bring the Bug home with him. He wasn't showing symptoms, but he'd been exposed, and he still wondered if he was infected.

Besides all that, he wasn't sure what he still owed the Army. He and his comrades had been betrayed. The rest of Bravo Company hadn't shown up at the hospital, and Wade's squad had been thrown alone into shit that was way over their heads. Wade still wanted to chip in and do some good, but he no longer trusted the Army to make decisions for him.

He thought of Sergeant Ramos's family: Maria and little Thomas in their hot apartment with no electricity or running water and the furniture stacked against the door. Maybe he should go and protect them. Maybe that was the best way to honor the sergeant who'd saved his life more times than he could count. Maybe that was a mission for which he could still fight. Maybe if he saved them he might finally make a real difference in this apocalyptic war.

In any case, Wade wasn't in any kind of mental condition to make that decision. His body sure wasn't in physical shape to act on one. No matter. For now, he was stranded here with this broken outfit.

"Something on your mind?" Rawlings asked.

Wade shook his head.

"Not something," she said softly. "Everything."

He nodded.

"Take it one day at a time, okay?"

He smiled. A day was a luxury.

"Okay," she said. "One minute at a time."

"Hey Sergeant, come take a look at this," Fisher said.

She accepted the binoculars and looked. She paled.

"Walking around like they own the place," Gray said. "Goddamn scumbags."

"It's Boston in name only now," Brown said. "They're everywhere."

"We should drop a nuke and be done with it."

Wade couldn't see past the others. "What's going on?"

She handed the binoculars to him. "Take a look, Wade. There. See them?"

He did. A vast parade marched through the burned-out wrecks scattered along Western Avenue. Several hundred strong, it was an army of the mad. Some were naked and painted in blood. Others wore scalps and necklaces of ears and masks of human flesh. It was impossible to recognize them as Americans, people who just weeks ago were lawyers, bank tellers, janitors and waitresses. The Klowns looked more like an ancient tribe of cannibals. It was hard to even recognize some of these self-mutilated things as human beings except for the constant laughter. They dragged

screaming men and women on leashes. They waved hatchets and torches and chainsaws and human heads.

Wade handed the binoculars to Fisher. He'd seen enough.

The crazies owned the downtown core, and they were migrating outward.

Pretty soon, it was all going to be over.

"All" as in civilization.

## TWENTY-THREE.

---

L.T. COLONEL PRINCE admired a framed article on the wall of his tiny office. He took it with him on every mission. The article, published in *The New York Times*, described his battalion's operations in the Korengal Valley. That year, seventy percent of the fighting in Afghanistan had been in that valley near the border with Pakistan, where Taliban and foreign fighters came to shoot at the infidels. His boys took the brunt of it, but they gave more than they got. *Conventional doctrine, aggressive action, flawless execution.* The article referred to him as Fighting Joe.

He opened the door and passed the worried staff sergeants and radio operators frantically calling units in the field. He left the command trailer and was surprised to see it was dusk. He'd completely lost track of the time. Time warped inside the trailer, where crisis set the schedule and the days blurred together. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten in the dining facility. The trailer looked so small from the outside. Standing there, he found it difficult to believe that the air-conditioned box held so much bullshit.

Hanscom Air Force Base had been home to three thousand airmen, all of whom had been relocated south except for a token company and a military police platoon. The sprawling facility included hangars, administrative facilities, barracks and other buildings. It had been well guarded before the plague, but it was no fortress. Prince had created a new perimeter of Hescos—massive burlap sacks filled with tons of dirt—to serve as walls, their tops lined with concertina wire. Mark19s provided overwatch in wood guard towers. Machine guns behind piles of sandbags guarded the entrances. They'd all seen action in the past few days.

Prince strolled the perimeter, passing trucks and Humvees, water bladders and generators. He saw every detail with perfect clarity. The disappearance of his headache was like the lifting of a heavy siege. For the first time in weeks, he could see and think clearly without the painful red fog in the way. He felt a surge of love for all of it. He'd been a soldier his whole life. A sergeant barked at his boys to gear up and get their shit on, they had work to do. Another sergeant dressed his squad for action. Prince liked what he saw; things were humming. Apaches spooled up on the runway. One of the great beasts lunged into the hot air on thumping rotors. The wash sent a wave of litter rolling toward Prince's feet. He frowned at an MRE wrapper fluttering past as if it were a crack in a dam; somebody was going to have to clean this shit up. A machine gun thudded in the distance. To the east, Boston burned.

At the east entrance, he passed several soldiers just returned from a patrol. One of them stood hunched over, hands on his knees, hyperventilating while the others tried to calm him. They nudged each other as their commanding officer approached.

Prince crouched in front of the gasping man. Man, hell. He was just a kid like all the rest. His boys weren't machines. They were people. But like machines, they

broke.

"You're all right now, son."

"Sorry," the kid gasped, "sir."

"No shame in it. Let it out." Prince gripped the soldier's shoulder. He held on for a moment, as if he could transfer his strength into the boy. When he withdrew his hand, he saw the crossed swords of the Tenth Mountain patch. Climb to Glory.

The boy's breathing began to ease. The other soldiers watched with anxious expressions. One of them was visibly shaking, dealing with his own demons. Another's eyelid twitched.

"I'm okay now, sir," the kid said.

"Bad out there, is it?" Prince asked.

The soldiers nodded.

"You've already done far more than your country had a right to ask," Prince told them. "I want you to know, for what it's worth, that I'm proud of you. And that I love you all."

"Sir?" one of the men said. "Any idea when it's going to be over?"

Prince stood and smiled. "Everything ends. Until then, we soldier on."

The simple, brute logic appealed to the soldiers. They saluted.

He returned it. "Get some rest, boys. Tomorrow's another day."

He headed back to the command trailer. The staff sergeants glared at the interruption. The air was tense and rank with fear. He ignored their questions as he passed, touching each of them lightly on the shoulder and leaving them calm but wondering.

Prince went into his office and closed the door. He took the framed *New York Times* article off the wall and dropped it into his wastebasket. He sat at his desk, pushed his computer aside and pulled out his bottle of Jim Beam and a clean glass. He picked up the photo of Susan and Frankie he kept on his desk. He stared at it for a long time.

For the first time in weeks, he could really see again. He saw it all with perfect clarity.

The endless blood.

Climb to Glory.

Lt. Colonel Prince removed the 9mm from his holster, put the business end between his teeth, and squeezed the trigger.

## TWENTY-FOUR.

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**A**S THE LIGHT OF DAY FADED, the convoy of Humvees roared down the road, scattering rubbish. The streetlights were off. Rotting corpses swung from the poles in the mounting twilight. Feasting birds scattered at the approaching diesel roar.

Captain Lee had built a career on honesty. He held nothing back in his intelligence reports. When asked, he gave his opinions without the sugar coating. He didn't believe in putting lipstick on pigs. He'd made captain because of it. He'd been held back from further promotion because of it.

He was going to tell Prince everything. He'd already submitted a report, but even that didn't contain half of what he'd seen. He'd shared the facts, but he had to make the Colonel see the horror. Right now, First Battalion was scattered, ineffective and losing ground by the day. They needed to pull their forces back into a defensible position and build their operations from there. They could take the city back, block by block, using overwhelming force and killing the infected without mercy. The stakes involved survival of an entire city, and there wasn't much time. The inmates were inches away from running the asylum and putting it to the torch.

As night fell, they approached the onramp that would take them onto Concord Turnpike. The road was supposed to be reserved to official traffic, but the police and their vehicles were gone, the rows of barriers smashed and flattened. The emptiness was unnerving. The silence made Lee think of Afghanistan. The calm between attacks.

Without being told, Murphy slowed the vehicle and cut the headlights. The men put on their night vision goggles, which rendered the dark landscape in a thousand shades of phosphorescent green. Nobody in sight. In the distance, headlights moved quickly along the turnpike, too fast for military. The vast fires of Boston glowed a brilliant green on the horizon. The Humvee's tires thudded across the smashed barriers. Lee held his carbine propped in the open window. Foster swiveled the .50-cal in the gun turret, sweeping the area for threats.

Behind them, the other two Humvees did the same.

"Do you believe in prayer, Captain?" Murphy asked.

"Not really, Mike."

"Could you try? I really don't want to die here."

"I believe in good planning, but that doesn't work either. It's all on us."

"That's not very reassuring."

"Really? We've gotten this far."

They pulled onto the turnpike and took off their goggles. The headlights flashed on. After a mile, they passed the first flaming wreck on the side of the road. Still no visible threats.

"Your prayers seem to be working, Mike."



Light flared in the side view mirrors.

"Way to jinx it, Captain," Murphy said.

The headlights in their rear were approaching fast. Lee remembered the top speed of a Humvee was fifty-five miles an hour.

"We can't outrun a civilian vehicle," he said. "And we can't shoot unless they're hostile."

"We won't know they're hostile until they're right on top of us."

"We should stop. Set up a defensive formation."

"Fire some warning shots? If they don't stop, we light them the fuck up."

The light gleamed bright in the side views.

Lee shook his head. "No time." He picked up the phone on his field radio. "Rebel Three, this is Rebel Six. What have you got, over?"

"Rebel Six, this is Rebel Three. Vehicles approaching fast. Five hundred meters. Over."

"You are authorized to use lethal force to respond to any threats. Over."

"That's a solid copy, Rebel Six. Over."

"Take no chances, Rebel Three."

"Don't worry about us, s—*what the fuck?*"

They'd misjudged how fast the vehicles could catch up to them. Lee heard the .50-cal hammer over the roar of an overstressed engine and found he wanted to pray after all. He flinched at the ear-splitting crash of metal. The car shattered against the two-ton military vehicle and burst into flames. Rebel Three lurched and rolled in a series of bangs.

He cursed himself for his stupidity. Here he was on his way back to preach to Prince, but even he didn't get it. The rules of engagement no longer mattered, only force protection. He should have declared the highway a free-fire zone and taken the consequences.

Behind him, Rebel Two's machine gun swung into action. Tracer rounds burst in the dark. A smoking car swung off the road. A truck raced past to catch up with Rebel One.

"We got company," said Murphy.

Foster got off a few rounds but missed. The truck was going too fast. He walked his fire forward, guided by the tracers. The truck pulled up alongside the Humvee's right and slowed. Lee saw naked, mutilated men swarming across the truck bed, clashing crowbars and golf clubs against the battered chassis. One of the crazies threw a colorful object that struck the rear of the Humvee.

*Water balloon.* Lee smelled piss. *Infected piss.* The Klowns lobbed grappling hooks like pirates. One hooked onto Lee's window. Its connecting chain pulled taut. A man tried to jump onto the Humvee but missed and became road kill. A baseball struck Lee in the chest. He grit his teeth against the flash of pain and the stars that sparked in his vision.

A shrieking devil was about to throw a bright yellow water balloon straight at him. Lee sprayed the back of the truck on full auto, draining the magazine in seconds. Laughing bodies spilled and smashed against the asphalt rushing under their feet.

When his rifle clicked empty, Lee pulled out his 9mm and unloaded it into the driver's cabin.

Foster found his mark. He lit up the truck back to front with a deadly metal rain. The vehicle crumpled like tin foil, riddled with smoking holes. The figures capering along the truck bed exploded. The windshield burst with a splash of glass. The truck disintegrated.

The Humvee door wrenched off with a crack as the shattered truck spilled off the highway.

Lee blinked into the darkness. "Shit."

"That was a little close," Murphy said, gripping the wheel.

"Bring us alongside Rebel Two, Mike."

Mike glared at his side view mirror. "Problem!"

Lee stood and leaned out of the vehicle. The wind howled past. He saw muzzle flashes burst in the dark. Rebel Two was demolishing a souped-up Trans Am at point blank range. On its other side, a tractor trailer roared on eighteen wheels. The truck was black. A woman had been chained to the grille like a freshly killed deer. The trailer's flank showed a smiling family eating hot dogs.

"Fire your fifty!" Lee ordered, but Foster was already on it, sending hot metal downrange into the grille, which began to blow steam. His next rounds smashed the windshield.

The laughing driver wrenched the wheel. The giant rig swerved into Rebel Two.

"No!" Foster screamed.

The truck struck the Humvee with a metallic clap and enveloped it, jackknifing before the trailer rolled, flaring sparks and shards of metal. Rebel Two disappeared.

Murphy brought the Humvee to a stop. He was drenched in sweat.

Lee keyed his radio. "Rebel Two, this is Rebel Six. What's your status, over?"

Nothing.

"All Rebel units, this is Rebel Six, how copy? Over."

Dead air.

Murphy turned in his seat. "What now, Captain?"

Lee reloaded his rifle and chambered a round. His hands were shaking.

"What now?" the sergeant repeated, shouting.

Lee took a deep breath. His body was shaking from excess adrenaline. He was exhausted; he'd never been so tired. He wanted to lie down on the road and take a long, long sleep. "Now," he said, "we go back and look for survivors."

## TWENTY-FIVE.

---

**R**EBEL ONE APPROACHED Hanscom at a crawl.

"Nice and slow, Mike," said Lee.

"Roger that," Murphy said, eyeing the Mark19 tracking them from one of the guard towers.

"Foster, let go of the fifty and grab a seat. We didn't come all this way to get killed by our own guys. They've got some itchy fingers over there."

Foster dropped out of the gun turret and sat next to Philips, the only survivor they'd found among the wreckage of the escort vehicles. Philips hugged his broken ribs and moaned.

Soldiers crouched behind sandbags between the Hescos. They glared at Lee over the barrels of their rifles. Scared kids. Lee counted three M240 machine guns. Bodies littered the ground around the perimeter, drawing flies in the heat. The air smelled like death. Death and defeat.

One of the soldiers stood, rifle at his shoulder and aimed. "That's far enough! Exit the vehicle slowly!"

Murphy parked the Humvee and cut the engine. Lee stepped out of the vehicle with his hands in the air.

"Captain Lee?"

"I'm glad you're still here, Sergeant Diaz. We couldn't get through on the radio."

"We've had a situation here."

"Then give me a sitrep, Sergeant."

Diaz approached, but he didn't lower his weapon.

Lee frowned. "Would you mind pointing that somewhere else?"

The sergeant lowered his gun as he stepped in front of Lee. "Sorry, sir, but we're going to have to check you and your men for infection."

"And how—" Lee started.

Diaz punched him in the stomach and retreated, rifle raised again. Lee stepped back with a gasp. Murphy and Foster stiffened but wisely didn't move.

After several moments, the sergeant lowered his gun. "You're clear."

If Lee had laughed at the pain, he'd be dead. He nodded as he caught his breath. "Good to know."

Diaz shook his hand. "Ouch. Forgot about the body armor."

After the others were cleared, the soldiers at the checkpoint visibly relaxed.

"So what's the situation?" Lee asked.

"The base is in lockdown. The Colonel's dead."

The news struck Lee like a second punch. "How?"

"Not sure, Captain. The command post is sealed up tight. The scuttlebutt is he shot himself. What the hell happened to you?"

"Concord Turnpike has been turned into an Indy 500 for homicidal maniacs. I lost good men out there." He ground his teeth in a sudden fit of rage. His boys had survived crossing half the Afghan bush only to die on an American road. "Report to Major Walker that I'm here and need to see him ASAP. Then get my men a hot and cot. One of them needs medical attention. See to it."

"Wilco, Captain. And by the way, uh, sorry about sucker punching you."

"Let's say I owe you one, Diaz."

The sergeant saluted and grinned. "Glad you're back safe, Captain."

Within minutes, the Humvee rolled into the base. Soldiers milled about without orders. They passed one sitting on the ground and crying into his hands. Lee spotted two men climbing over one of the Hescos and disappearing. The Humvee parked near the command post.

"Major Walker in command," Lee said. "Christ, this couldn't get any worse."

Walker was a politician. He was a fantastic administrator but a terrible soldier, and about as inspiring as white paint on a white wall.

Murphy nodded. "Embrace the Suck, Captain."

The Suck. The Army version of SNAFU. They were pioneering new territory in Suck right now. Lee wanted to say more, but he'd already said too much. A good officer didn't bitch down the chain of command. He bitched *up*. He needed to find Walker and do some bitching.

Leaving his men at the Humvee, he entered the trailer that served as the battalion command post. The place stank of fear and flop sweat. He saw the same haggard faces at their workstations, but the usual frantic pace had slowed to a crawl. The men were going through the motions. They grimaced at the sound of the door opening but otherwise ignored him.

Walker stood with his back to him, studying the big board. Lee glanced at it and noticed the tactical situation had changed. All units had left the Greater Boston core and were converging on Hanscom. All were listed as in contact with the enemy. First Battalion appeared to be in retreat. Lee had missed a hell of a lot while he was out in the field.

"Captain Lee, reporting to the commanding officer as requested, sir."

The major turned and greeted him with an enigmatic smile. "Ah, Captain. It's good to have you back. You're exactly the man I wanted to see."

Lee smelled a rat but knew better than to show it. "That's a mutual sentiment, sir."

Walker led him into the Colonel's office. Though the body had been removed, the room smelled of ammonia and the tang of a recent gunshot. The major sat at Prince's desk and motioned for Lee to grab a chair opposite. Lee noticed a large pink circle on the wall behind Walker's head, obviously from where Prince's blood and brains had been hastily scrubbed.

"Where's the body?" Lee asked.

"We'll take care of him. There will be a service at twelve-hundred." The major opened a drawer and produced a bottle of Jim Beam and two glasses. He poured two fingers into each.

Lee was about to say it was a little early for a drink but decided, what the hell. He was still wondering what Walker's game was. "To the Colonel," Lee said, raising his

glass. "He was a good man." He tossed back his drink while Walker sipped at his.

"He was a good man," Walker said. "He just couldn't..."

"Couldn't what?"

"He just couldn't handle it. All of it."

"Did you report it up the chain of command?"

Walker lit a cigarette. "Little problem with that. The chain of command is broken. Big Brother is dead. Infected and killed by an airstrike. Fort Drum has gone dark."

Lee stiffened. "Drum's in the middle of nowhere."

"But we send our wounded there. We've been doing it from the start."

"The incubation takes longer than we were told in some cases?"

The major shrugged. "That's my theory. But I don't know for sure. We're all learning on the job here, right?"

Lee nodded. Something clicked. "That's why you set up Harvard Stadium as a casualty collection point. Those were your orders. The Colonel had nothing to do with it."

Walker smiled.

Lee added, "You were putting them into quarantine."

"That's right."

Another epiphany struck Lee. "Keeping the ground troops out of the hospitals and destroying them by air. That was your decision, not Prince's."

Walker's smile turned into a grin. "Now I'm impressed."

"So was the withdrawal. You've been pulling our forces out of the theater a little at a time. Ordering them into a defensive posture. Telling the Colonel they were being forced out."

The major stubbed out his cigarette and blew a stream of smoke across the desk. "They *were* forced out. Not all of them will make it back. It may be too late."

Lee couldn't believe Walker's gumption. "You cut the civilians loose. You cut *Boston* loose. Christ, even our own wounded. The question is why."

"Why do you think? Force protection, Captain. Extreme measures for extreme times. Consider this: We almost sent three companies of combat infantry into the city's hospitals. Aside from what that would have done to morale, I'm not even sure we had enough bullets."

"What would have happened if you were wrong?"

Walker shrugged again. "I would have been locked up, I suppose."

"Locked up, hell. Prince would have had you executed."

"The Army taught us to make decisions based on probabilities. I was probably right. If I was wrong, I would have died anyway. We all would. Better a bullet than *them*."

Lee shook his head in wonder. "So what now? What do you intend to do?"

"You tell me. You're in charge here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean you're going to have to take command."

What Walker was proposing was impossible. "I don't understand."

The major refilled their glasses. "The men need a leader. The men need command. Normally, I'd be happy to do it, but I'm not cut out for this. You are."

"I appreciate your confidence, Major, but there's no way it would get approved."

"You know the saying, 'The center cannot hold'? The center's gone, Captain. We're in the midst of wholesale collapse here. If we don't get somebody in charge the men will believe in and follow, they're going to walk away. They're going to go home."

Lee thought of the two soldiers he saw climbing over the Hescos. Desertion in broad daylight. He picked up his glass and eyed its contents. "So I'm supposed to promote myself to the rank of Lt. Colonel?"

"You still don't get it. In the past five weeks, almost every guideline that was sent down from the Brass, all those endless PowerPoint presentations for the officers, was about unlearning our training so we can adapt as a military force. The only way to survive this is unlearn *everything* and start over. Military protocols don't matter anymore, Captain, just leadership and survival. Preserving something before it all comes apart."

Walker opened the breast pocket of his blouse and produced two silver oak collar insignia pins. He set them on the desk. "We lost the battle, Harry. If you don't take command, we'll lose everything."

Lee picked up one of the pins. He would be dishonorably discharged if he put it on, maybe even jailed. Hell, maybe even shot. But who was going to shoot him? Walker was right. The Army was falling apart. The battalion was on its own, and it was unraveling fast. The men needed leadership, even if that leadership was technically a charade.

For Harry Lee, the mission was everything. It superseded even himself.

Had he heard everything, and was it the truth? Did the major have a game? Did Walker intend to lead through him? If so, the man was going to be severely disappointed.

Lee downed his drink. He closed his hand around the pin.

Walker smiled. "How does it feel, Harry?"

"Like I'm robbing a corpse."

Walker smirked. "It might feel different."

"Like what?"

"Like you're saving the battalion."

"I've got to get my head around it."

"As long as your head is in the game." After a slight pause, Walker added, "Sir."

"All right. I'll address the men at the funeral. We're going to need a game plan."

"I have some information that may help," the major said. "I've been talking to my counterparts at other battalions across the Northeast and Midwest. They're all worse off than we are. Everybody is actively engaged. Civilian authority has bled out. The military commanders are beginning to act independently. They don't like the strategy, and they're starting to break off on their own. Prince was one of the last die-hards."

"Options, then. We could pull out of the city, regroup and take it back block by block. Announce a curfew to keep the citizens off the streets. Shoot everything in sight." Lee might go down in history as another Attila the Hun, but it just might save the city.

"Problem, sir. Major General Brock wants to absorb the battalion into his command."

Lee sighed. "And he'll order us back into the city to do what we were doing before." He thought about it. "The other option is to resist. We can't take on the Massachusetts Guard."

"Correct. I don't think we have the men, materiel or energy to do what you're thinking, in any case. Resupply has slowed to a trickle. I've been carefully shepherding what we've got."

"That doesn't give us a lot of options. We either work for Brock or fight him."

"There is another way."

"What's that?"

"We could leave Massachusetts."

Lee looked at him in surprise. Walker had told him they needed to start thinking outside the box, but it appeared the man was ready to throw away the box. "And go where?"

The major sipped his drink. "Florida."

"What's in Florida?"

"General Wallace. He's cleared the peninsula of infection. He's got air assets to keep anybody out he wants kept out. He's got considerable strength and resources and the closest thing to a working civilian government outside of Mount Weather. I've been in contact with a few units that have had the same idea. If enough of the military can make it to Florida, maybe Wallace would have enough strength to take back the country."

It was Lee's plan for Boston but on a national scale. "Let me give it some thought, Major."

"Very good, sir."

Lee regarded Walker with new respect. "You know, I was wrong about you."

Walker grinned. "I doubt that. I'm no hero. I want to stay alive, and I figure being right here, in the middle of a combat-effective battalion, is the best way to do that."

Lee would also be the man who might get shot once they reached Florida for disobeying orders and giving up Boston. *If* they were going to Florida. First, they would go to Fort Drum and find out what had happened there. They needed to ensure the soldiers' families were safe and get supplies. Maybe that would be enough.

"I think we'll work well together in any case," Lee said.

"I share the sentiment, sir."

"Good, good. And, Major?"

"Sir?"

"You contravened the Colonel's orders. If you do the same to me, I'll have you shot. Are we clear on that?"

Again, that enigmatic smile. "Crystal, sir."

## TWENTY-SIX.

---

**W**ADE HOPED A passing unit would bring in more wounded so he could hit them up for news, but nobody came. They had no radio. They were cut off.

He kept to himself all morning. He nursed his banged-up ankle, his face. Something was in there, deep in his wound, tickling. Moving. Searching. He inventoried his emotions as a matter of routine. He didn't want to hurt himself or anybody else. The truth was he felt numb.

Maybe he wasn't infected after all. Maybe he was immune. Or maybe he was about to become a murderer in five, four, three, two—

Outside, Boston burned and smoldered. Black smoke filled the sky.

There were around thirty soldiers in the building, and only nine appeared able to function for an extended period of time. Late in the morning, those men got up off the floor and walked down the hall. Wade found himself alone with three soldiers who lay with their backs to him—in other words, totally alone. These men were gone, empty husks. The things they'd seen and done had destroyed their ability to cope.

He stood and dusted himself off. After some wandering, he found the others in one of the offices. They'd pushed the furniture against the walls and sat on the dusty carpet in a semicircle around Rawlings. She talked while she cleaned her disassembled carbine with a rod and patch.

"You've all been in the shit," she said. "You know that, in combat, nobody cares who you voted for, what god you worship, the color of your skin, or where your ancestors came from. All that matters is whether your friends are going to watch your six while you watch theirs. It's true there are no atheists in foxholes, but the soldier's religion is his platoon. He depends on his platoon more than he does God." She smiled. "Welcome, Private Wade."

Wade nodded and sat with the others. "What's this all about?"

"Boot camp for lost souls. We're planning on how we're going to get out of here and back to civilization. Did you get the sergeant's carbine?"

"He said he'd cut off my balls if I took his weapon."

Rawlings looked impressed. "You got more out of him than we did. Did he say anything else? Is he going to get back into the game?"

"I didn't stick around to find out. I like my balls."

The men chuckled lightly.

"All right." Rawlings looked at Fisher and tilted her head toward Wade.

Fisher stood and gave Wade his M4. "My hands keep shaking. I can't shoot for shit. You should have it."

"Thanks," Wade said, taking the weapon. He found the familiar weight of the carbine comforting. "I'll take good care of it for you."

"You do that, bro."



Rawlings continued. "The problem is we're not with our platoons. They're dead, or they're not here. It's every man for himself at this post. All of us have lost friends, but we're still here. Why? It doesn't matter why. It just is. It hurts like hell, but that's a good thing. The pain of losing everything, the guilt of having made it while other men, better men, didn't. Embrace that pain. Make that guilt your friend."

Wade thought of Ramos, Williams, Ford and Eraserhead, and the faces of other men he'd once called brother. All of them gone forever.

Rawlings put aside the cleaning rod and patch and began to reassemble her carbine. "You fought for those men, and now they're gone. So why are you here? Why are you still fighting? What are you fighting for? We need a reason to fight. Think about that reason and hold onto it. I don't care if it's your mom back home or America or beer and tits, hold onto it."

The man chuckled again.

"Whatever it is, it's all you got right now. And once you got a hold of it, once it's yours, you'll be ready to fight. The people in this room, we're going to be a new unit. You don't need me to tell you that we have to be, or we won't make it."

Wade looked at the others. Gray scowled back at him. Brown wore a dreamy, vacant expression. Fisher looked pale and shaky, as always. Wade didn't feel encouraged. Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't need inspiration from a National Guard reservist to keep going. They were all damaged goods, not least of all him. Somehow, this group of shattered men was going to have to learn to work together and trust each other with their very lives.

"The Klowns are out there," Rawlings went on, "and they know we're in here. Some heavy shit is coming, and we're going to be in it neck deep. Because mark my words, gentlemen, it's only a matter of time before the Klowns get in or the civilians get pissed off enough to take a shot at us. If we want to survive, we're going to have to work together."

She slapped a magazine into the carbine's well and propped the weapon against the wall next to her. "All right, then. Enough of this kumbaya shit. Let's talk about how we're going to get out of here alive."

## TWENTY-SEVEN.

---

L.T. COLONEL HARRY LEE'S eyes roamed across the big board and the drone footage rolling on multiple monitors. All displayed the progress of First Battalion's scattered elements as they moved through Greater Boston's clogged arteries and converged on Hanscom. The soldiers were fighting hard for every mile, their vehicles keeping just ahead of the mass migration of infected citizens pouring out of the burning city.

Major Walker had proven to be a slippery one, but he'd probably saved the battalion with his subversive maneuvering. Aside from the crazies, tens of thousands of dazed refugees were on the move. They were easy pickings on the street. The crazies killed or infected them, swelling their own numbers into an irresistible flood.

First Battalion was in full retreat. Lee was starting to tremble with exhaustion. He was sweating, and his body ached. He'd been standing for hours with every muscle clenched with tension. Those were his boys out there, and if they failed, it was game over. The burden of command brought a heady sense of responsibility he hadn't anticipated.

He gratefully accepted a cup of strong coffee from a second lieutenant. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had some decent chow and sleep.

"Watch it," he murmured as Alpha Company's vehicles stacked up at a bottleneck. "Cover your flanks and rear until you get things squared away."

He was about to ask for the radio when Captain Randy "Hallelujah" Hayes sent vehicles out in every direction to provide security to the main column. Lee saw the fifties rocking in the gun turrets. White particles fluttered to the ground around the gunners—ash falling from the sky as if it were snowing in high summer. Tracers zipped downrange. The big rounds chewed up people and vehicles.

Seeing the way the Alpha boys pounded their opposition made Lee consider—just for a moment—ordering them to turn around and go back into Boston. Concentrated, his lightfighters could deliver incredible firepower. They appeared almost invincible.

But appearances were deceiving. Pulling out was the right thing to do. Boston was a lost cause, its people fled or infected, its once proud buildings slowly converting into ash. Lee doubted his forces had enough bullets to do the job at this point.

"Radio," he said.

A staff sergeant gave him the phone. Lee barked instructions to the Apaches assigned to provide top cover for Alpha. He directed cannon fire at several civilian vehicles speeding along an open stretch of road toward Alpha's position.

He handed the radio back and sipped his coffee. On one of the video monitors, he kept watch on a speeding white Cadillac. Welded spikes protruded from its hood and roof, onto which a grisly array of severed heads had been mounted.

The vehicle wilted under chain gun fire from one of the Apaches then burst into a fireball.

*Good work.* Behind him, one of the staff sergeants whistled. The staff appeared to be in good spirits. The command post hummed with new energy. They were losing, but they were doing something. They had a new mission, one they could understand, one that had promise. They were getting the hell out from under the big hammer.

They weren't retreating. No. He hadn't put it like that during his speech at Prince's funeral, which he'd kept short on platitudes and long on communicating the new strategy. He called it "redeployment." They'd fought the good fight, accomplished what they could, and they were returning to Fort Drum. If there were infected at Drum, they'd clean house. If there were survivors, they'd help them.

The soldiers had looked back at him with faces lined with constant stress and fatigue. They didn't cheer. But he saw a new gleam in their hollowed eyes. Lee hoped the men coming back from Boston felt the same way about their new mission. Together, they'd go to Fort Drum. They'd rest and refit then plan their next move.

Bravo Company approached the wire. They'd made it.

Lee heard cheering outside. "Major," he said, "take over here. Back in five."

Walker snapped to it. "Yes, sir."

Lee wanted to greet Captain Marsh personally. It wasn't going to be a pleasant meeting. He had bad news: The captain's missing platoon had gone into one of the hospitals and had been virtually overrun. And Marsh was going to have to hand over his wounded, who would be locked up and cared for in a special quarantine facility on base.

All in all, the next few days would severely test Lee's diplomatic skills. If he was going to succeed as the new commanding officer, he needed the support of the field officers.

He stepped out of the command post as the column of Humvees rolled through the gate and began to coil near the maintenance building. Soldiers shouted and slapped the metal hides of the vehicles as they rumbled past. The gunners smiled down at them and flashed the victory sign.

They stiffened at the sight of Lee.

One by one, they saluted him as they passed.

## ***TWENTY-EIGHT.***

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**W**ADE KNEW HE had to come clean with Rawlings.

He'd seen a lot of zombie movies back in high school. There was always some guy who got bitten but kept it secret from everybody else. Wade could never understand the motivation. If you knew you were infected and going to die, why not tell the others in your group? He always pictured himself in that situation, thinking he'd grab the nearest weapon and go out in a blaze of glory. With nothing to lose, he'd sacrifice himself so that others might live.

The real world was not a movie. In the real world, the monsters didn't shamble around trying to eat you; they howled with laughter while they pressed a hot iron into your face. Wade didn't know if he was infected. If there was any chance he wasn't, he didn't want to be tossed out on the street to face those things alone. And if he was, he wasn't sure he could handle being rejected and tossed out by the group. He needed them in more ways than one.

Still, he owed them the truth. If there was any chance he could be a danger to them, they should know about it. The need to come clean felt like a crushing weight.

Wade found Rawlings standing in front of one of the big picture windows overlooking the crowds boiling in the stadium.

She greeted him with a nod before returning to the view. "I was just thinking about human nature, Wade."

"What about it?"

"Cooperate versus compete. When the shit hits the fan, most people try to do the right thing. Then some assholes go and ruin it for everybody. See those guys?" She pointed at a gang of teenagers at the eastern edge of the playing field.

He nodded. "Yeah. What about them?"

"At least once a day, they drag some girl under the stands."

Wade frowned with disgust. "We should—"

"There isn't a damn thing we can do about it."

"Well," he said. He didn't know what to say.

"More people come in every day. Nowhere out there is safe now."

Wade asked, "It's safe in here?"

She offered up a grim smile. "You're a quick study, Private Wade."

They stood in silence for a few moments, watching the crowd. A boom box down in the camp played a rap song that pounded the air with its bass line. Wade shook his head at the stupidity. If he could hear the music up here, the Klowns could hear it out there.

After a while, Rawlings nudged him and swept her arm across the view. "One day, my son, all this will be yours."

He smiled at her humor. Rawlings was like no other woman he'd ever known, the polar opposite of the girls back in high school, who were so insecure yet so full of themselves. With Rawlings, what you saw was what you got. He really liked her.

One more reason to come clean.

But all the more reason to fear her loathing and rejection.

"Why don't we leave?" he asked. "It seems to me we're sitting ducks here."

"We're healing, Wade. We need every minute of rest to get our fighting spirit back. Without it, we won't last five minutes on the street. We'll be dead meat out there."

"We can do it," he assured her.

"What about the other twenty guys here who are still too messed up to wipe their own asses? We need to give them every chance to come around and step up. I don't know about you, but I sure as hell am not super excited about leaving them behind to get chopped up."

Wade nodded. She was right. But at some point, they were going to have to make a tough decision if they wanted to survive.

"You're cutting it awfully close," he said. If it wasn't too late already.

"I know. I just don't want to leave them." She winced. "And maybe I'm a little scared, okay?"

Wade hated seeing her forced to admit that. Of course she was scared. They were all scared. They were terrified. He wanted to put his arm around her and comfort her. He patted her shoulder instead. "It's going to be all right."

"I grew up here. Bean Town is my home. It's all going up in smoke. History itself. All those people..." Rawlings wiped her eyes and set her jaw. "I'll face it when I'm ready."

"And then what? What's the plan?"

"You know the egress routes and the rally point. Assuming we get out of the building alive, we strike west. Travel only at night. Cross the river. Then north all the way to Hanscom."

"You're coming with us?"

"Camp Edwards is too far away. Think they'll let me join your club?"

"We'll make a mountaineer out of you in no time, Sergeant."

"Once you're back with the Tenth, I'll be just another Nasty Girl to you hotshots."

Wade smiled. "Not a chance."

"I can't stay with you boys anyway. I'll find a Guard unit after we get to Hanscom. Gotta get back to my Bay Staters. No offense or anything to you mountaineers."

"Hanscom's pretty far too. Twenty clicks at least."

"Then I hope you know how to hotwire a car," she said brightly. "The only other option is to head downtown toward the sound of gunfire and hope the people doing the firing is a Guard unit."

"Listen, I need to tell you something." His heart suddenly pounded in his chest. His voice sounded thin. He took a deep breath. "Can I tell you something important?"

Rawlings eyed him warily and crossed her arms. "What is it? Shoot."

"I might have the Bug."

She looked around to make sure nobody else heard. The other men lay on the floor facing the walls. She hissed, "Why do you say that?"

"My sergeant was infected. He licked his knife and cut my face with it."

"You've been here for days. The Bug incubates faster than that. You'd be a Klown by now."

"Maybe they were wrong. Maybe it takes longer with some people."

"That's not what we were told. That's all I'm saying."

He thought about it. "Do you think I'm immune?"

"Who knows? The Bug doesn't survive very long outside the body. Maybe it died before you got that cut. Hell, Wade, it could be anything. But the fact is you aren't sick."

"Okay." He let out a long shuddering sigh. "Okay."

She snorted. "Is this what's had you all tied up in knots? God, most of us were wounded before we got here. We were all exposed, just like you. Private Wade, you need to think about more important things. Things like you lost people you really cared about. Like it wasn't your fault they died. Like you need to keep fighting if you want to survive. Like how much the rest of us need you to be at your best if we're all going to get through this."

He nodded and studied his feet. He sighed again, but with relief. "All right."

"Rawlings!" Fisher called. He stomped into the room, startling the men lying on the floor. He noticed her at the window. "Oh, Sergeant. The camp just let in some new people. They're telling everybody the Army is bugging out of Boston north of the river."

"That's Tenth Mountain's area of operations," Wade said.

"It's the fire," Rawlings pointed out. "The fire is pushing everybody out."

"Whatever it is, other refugees are saying the same thing. Units all over are pulling out. Word's going around the civilians. They're pissed off."

Wade checked the window. The crowds down in the stadium were concentrating. Everywhere, angry men and women pointed up at the windows of the athletics department building.

Rawlings paled. "Damn. Anybody who wants to go, we're leaving tonight. Pass the word, Fisher."

"Will do, ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me, Fisher. I'm not an officer."

Wade looked at her in surprise. "We're leaving now? Just like that?"

"Just like that, Private Wade. The situation has changed. You've got a few hours to get your stuff together. At oh-dark-thirty, we're bugging out." She eyed the crowd. "If they let us."

## ***TWENTY-NINE.***

---

**L**T. COLONEL LEE watched the captains of First Battalion file into the Air Force administrative building. It was time for a powwow.

“Ready when you are, sir,” Walker told him. “The room’s all set up.”

They followed the captains inside. Lee took a deep breath and let it go. There was a lot riding on the outcome of the upcoming meeting—everything, actually.

The men knew his character and service record. He’d served with some of them going back years. Iraq. Korengal Valley. They respected him. But would they follow him?

He let go of his worries. They either would or they wouldn’t. He’d make his case, and they’d make up their minds. That was the best he could do.

The conference room was filled with men: the captains of Alpha through Echo and HQ, the young lieutenants who served as their XO’s, and the battalion sergeant major, Doug Turner, who represented the enlisted men.

At the sight of Lee, Turner stood at attention. “Gentlemen, the commanding officer.”

The officers made to stand, but Lee told them to be at ease, taking a seat at the head of the table. The captains, freshly showered and fed, powered up their iPads as they waited for him to speak. Strong java brewed in a coffeemaker in the corner.

“Gentlemen, thank you for your attendance. For the first part of our meeting, anybody below the rank of captain, please give us the room.”

Turner escorted the lieutenants into another part of the building.

Lee planted his elbows on the table. “You’ve all done an exemplary job far beyond the call of duty over the past weeks. And you got your men back safe. Now we need to talk about what comes next. As you know, I have assumed command as First Battalion CO.”

“Congratulations on your promotion, sir,” Captain Marsh of Bravo Company said.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“It’s extraordinary, to say the least,” the man added, his tone deferential but testing.

“That’s because I wasn’t actually promoted. Or appointed to command.”

The men stared at him, their mouths hanging open.

Lee went on. “The chain of command has been completely disrupted. The Bug’s incubation period in some cases appears to be longer than previously understood. Casualties sent to the rear have spread infection. There are now detection kits that can determine on the spot if somebody is infected, but they’re being prioritized to military personnel in Florida and at Mount Weather. In the case of regimental command, all of headquarters was compromised and had to be terminated via airstrike. In the case of divisional command, Fort Drum has gone dark. We’re working on getting eyes on base via satellite, but it’s chaos across the board.”

Lee paused to let all that sink in. Some of the men had families living at Drum.

Marsh glanced at Major Walker. Lee knew what Marsh was thinking. He was thinking the major should have assumed command as the senior officer, but he didn't believe Walker could get them out of the mess they were in. Lee wondered what Marsh would say if he knew the major shared that sentiment.

"I fully support Lee taking command," Walker said, putting the issue to bed.

"As a temporary posting," Captain Sommers of Charlie Company pointed out, "until we get back on the reservation. Right?"

Lee nodded. So did the other men.

"Major Walker pulled you out of the core," Lee said before they had a chance to come up with any fresh objections. "I ordered you the rest of the way here."

Hallelujah Hayes snorted. "That didn't come from the top, either?"

"No," Lee told him. "That's on me too."

Marsh said, "You're stretching the concept of independent initiative far beyond what's accepted. We could all get shit-canned for this."

Lee noted Marsh said *accepted*, not *acceptable*. An important distinction. "It's on me," he repeated.

"Then God help you. Sir."

Captain Perez of Delta Company glared at the others. "Who wants to go back into Boston?"

Nobody raised his hand. They knew the city was a lost cause.

"So we're here," Marsh said. "Now what?"

"The first step is Fort Drum," Lee replied. "Retake it if necessary. Make sure our families are safe. Rest and refit."

"Wait a minute. Boston's a write-off. We can't hold onto the real estate. I get that. But there are still civilians here who need our protection."

"And I have a wife and three kids at Drum," Sommers said. "Lee's right. Let Brock handle his people. It's about time we took care of our own."

"Our mission is to save Boston."

"And we failed, Captain. That sucks. But it's how it is."

"Tell that to all of our guys who went through hell and died out there."

"Our mission," Lee said, "is to save the United States. That's the big picture."

"Suppose we got every civilian in one place and protected them," Captain Johnston of Echo Company said. As a support company, Echo took care of everything from the motor pool to making sure the men got their three squares a day. "How would we feed them? Treat them when they're sick? We don't have the resources. We're down to essentials just for our own boys. We barely have enough ordnance and fuel left to get us to Drum."

"We could attach ourselves to Brock," Marsh said, adding quickly, "It's an option."

"He's got eight thousand people in the field, and he can barely keep them supplied," Johnston told him.

"Besides that," Sommers added, "he'd just send us back into the meat grinder."

That appeared to settle the issue. Necessity trumped the moral considerations. They couldn't protect the people of Boston any longer, because soon, it would simply no longer be possible.



"So what happens after Drum?" Perez asked.

"We have options," Lee said. "We may become attached to another command that can provide the resources we need to remain combat effective. We could establish a sphere of protection for civilians. Set up refugee camps if somebody can supply them. Major Walker had another idea. It's crazy or bold, take your pick. But the way things are going, it may be our last chance."

"What's that, sir?"

Lee said, "Florida."

## ***THIRTY.***

---

**S**TEP OFF IN LESS THAN TWO HOURS. A night march through a city of nightmares.

Wade entered a dark room to test the night vision goggles mounted on his helmet. His vision instantly went from 20/20 to 20/40 as the world became rendered in luminous shades of green. The monocular view provided forty-degree tunnel vision and eliminated depth perception.

In short, the NVGs sucked. But they worked, amplifying the dying daylight coming through the window thirty thousand times, turning night into day. Tonight, out on the street, being able to see would give him a critical survival edge. The Klowns were crazy, but they weren't superhuman. They couldn't see in the dark.

He turned them off and flipped them up from his eyes.

And saw the horde.

## THIRTY-ONE.

---

THERE WERE HUNDREDS OF THEM, a maniacal army of Klowns dressed in rags and covered in fresh scars and other tribal mutilations whose significance was known only to the infected. Their laughter filled the night, drowning out the popping of distant gunfire. They came out of the dusk in a mob and filled the street, dragging their weapons and grisly trophies along the ground.

They stopped in front of the stadium and listened to the throbbing bass of multiple boom boxes turned up too loud for common sense. Bouncing on bare feet, they grinned and clawed at the air. They wanted so badly to get inside.

Across the throng, men dropped onto their backs and pulled taut powerful slingshots, their feet raised against the handles. Their brothers lovingly placed bright objects onto the leather pads. The men released. The objects sailed through the air. Some burst against the wall. The rest sailed over the top of the stadium and disappeared.

They looked like water balloons.

Wade ran into the hallway, calling for Rawlings. He found her in an office overlooking the stadium. Soldiers crowded the windows, staring down at the playing field where red, white and blue balloons fell out of the sky and splashed among the refugees.

"What the hell are they doing?" Fisher cried.

The crowds parted around the impacts, leaving people writhing on the ground.

"Some type of poison, looks like," Gray said.

*Kaffa.* Wade remembered something he'd read in one of his military history books. During the Middle Ages, the Tartars laid siege to Kaffa, a Genoese trading colony established in the Crimea, but they failed to capture it after the Black Plague broke out in their camp. Before they left, they placed the bodies of their dead on catapults and launched them into the city by the hundreds. Within weeks, plague had decimated the city's defenders. Biological warfare.

One of the bodies on the playing field lurched to his feet and ran at the nearest refugees, clawing at them. Shots rang out as more balloons rained from the sky. Thousands fled into the stands, filling the air with an endless scream. Scores of people fought across the field. Tents collapsed or burst into flames as cook fires spilled.

"It's piss," Wade said. "They filled the balloons with their piss. It's infecting people."

"The Bug can't survive outside the body that long," Rawlings said.

Wade touched his face, fingering the dirty bandage.

Gray smashed the window with the butt of his rifle and propped his weapon on the sill. He took aim.

Wade grabbed the barrel and yanked it up. "What are you doing?"

"There are Klowns down there!"

"You're going to get us all killed."

"Fuck you! We can stop it. We can hold this place."

"We can't. Trust me. I saw them."

"How many?" Rawlings asked.

Wade looked her in the eye. "Too many."

They froze as something heavy thudded in the distance.

BOOM

"Aw, shit," Fisher said, backing away from the window. He looked around as if searching for somewhere to hide. "Aw, fuck. What is that?"

"Battering ram," Wade said. "I saw them carrying it."

"We're okay here for now," Rawlings said. "We're in a different building."

"Are you kidding?" Fisher asked. "It's only a matter of time before they find us."

"They won't find us. We're getting the heck out of Dodge."

BOOM

Gray fixed his fierce glare on her. "Those people down there won't stand a chance without our help, Sergeant. It's our job. It's what we signed up to do."

"There's nothing we can do for them, soldier."

"The hell there isn't. We can fight."

"Then stay and fight. I'm bugging out. Those people down there are already dead."

BOOM

Wade didn't move. The battle on the playing field had spread into the stands. The screaming never seemed to break. He blinked at the gunshots. People stampeded in all directions, trying to flee the knots of fighting. Bodies rolled down the steps. He couldn't tear his eyes from the sight.

"We have to move," Rawlings pleaded. "Now."

Wade looked at her in mute horror. All the teambuilding and planning they'd done was for nothing. They were broken. Already they were falling apart.

BOOM

"Make a hole!" The sergeant who'd lain on the floor in a stupor for the past few days staggered past them to the broken window. He rested his carbine on the windowsill and started shooting.

Wade saw figures drop. He couldn't tell if they were infected or not.

CRASH

The Klowns flooded onto the playing field, trampling the tents. The screaming rose in pitch. In seconds, the field resembled a slaughterhouse. The Klowns raced into the stands next, hacking at anything that moved and spreading their disease to their ever-present soundtrack of shrieking laughter. Blood splashed across the bleachers. Some of the crazies blared long, random notes on trumpets and tubas. Others frolicked among the dead, collecting their grisly trophies.

"Oh my God," Fisher said. "Oh, Jesus Christ."

The sergeant dropped an empty mag and loaded a fresh one into his carbine, muttering the whole time.

"Thy kingdom come." The sergeant fired again. "Thy will be done."

Wade set his jaw. It was time to move. "All right, guys. We're getting out of here right now."

The squad had gathered, all ten, geared up in full battle rattle. Wade and Rawlings raced downstairs ahead of the others and headed for the west exit. The doorway was blocked with piled office furniture and light fixtures. They frantically grabbed the nearest pieces and threw them out of the way. Gray, Fisher and Brown arrived and helped. They opened the door.

A giant wearing a loincloth made out of a leathered human face lunged at them with a bloody claw hammer. "*HAW, HAW!*"

*Fight or flight.* Wade wanted to run. Then his training took over. He fired a burst into the giant. The Klown spun around and fell hard as if his legs had been kicked out from under him. He immediately started to get back up.

Rawlings put a round in his head. The hellish screaming inside the stadium went on and on.

"We're heading west," Wade said. "Jungle file. Team Alpha on the left, Bravo on the right. If you see something, go to guns on it. Fire and move. While we move, we keep the initiative. Tempo, tempo, tempo. If we get separated, remember the rally points."

He wasn't afraid anymore. He still had a lot of things worth fighting to save. The survivors of his platoon, wherever they were. Ramos's family, still holed up in their apartment waiting for the sergeant to come rescue them. And not least of all, Rawlings.

## THIRTY-TWO.

---

THE COMMAND POST was a beehive of frantic activity as First Battalion HQ worked to prepare for the retreat back to Fort Drum.

*Redeployment*, Lee reminded himself. He scanned the big board. The only blue units left in Boston were National Guard, and they were clustering to the south, pushed out of the city by fires and waves of infected. Everything else was gone. Fire, police, paramedics, all of it. The only authority still active had a lot of firepower. Or, in the case of the crazies, numbers and sheer will.

CNN and the other networks were off the air. All civilian television broadcasting had been bumped. Mount Weather had taken over what was left of the national communications network. On the video monitor, an attractive blonde shared the latest Federal propaganda. Captions rolled across the bottom of the screen, advising people to stock up on food and water, stay in their homes and avoid laughing when approaching military personnel. To find the nearest safety shelter, they were supposed to call an 800 number.

Walker was right. Local civilian authority had collapsed. Central civilian authority was following suit as decisionmaking at the top became increasingly erratic and military commanders in the field ignored their orders. The military itself was breaking down due to disruptions in the chain of command. Real authority rested with local commanders trying to hold what they could with dwindling resources.

"Sergeant Major Turner, reporting as ordered."

Lee returned the man's salute. "Sergeant Major, how long have you been in uniform?"

"Twenty-one years next month, sir."

Lee had to handle Turner with some caution. Not only was he the senior enlisted man left standing, he had a monumental amount of tactical and operational experience that was worth its weight in gold. While officers ran the Army, senior non-commissioned officers ran the men, and without the men behind him, any plan Lee formulated would die like a fish out of water. He needed to get on Turner's good side, and stay there.

"Another old-timer like me," he said. "You served Lieutenant Colonel Prince with distinction."

"Thank you, sir."

"I expect the same honesty from you. I respect your opinion. Always give it to me straight."

The big sergeant grinned. "I'm your man for that, sir."

"What's the feeling in the ranks? About leaving Boston?"

"They're happy to be going for the most part. They need a rest. Replace the gear they've lost. Retrain if there's time. They don't like failing a mission, but the mission

ain't everything."

"The mission is everything, Sergeant Major. But the mission is changing. That's how they need to see it."

"Hooah, sir."

"Do they still have confidence? I'll be frank with you. We're becoming more of a volunteer army by the day. Do they want to be here, or would they rather go home to their families?"

"The older guys, their families are at Drum. So we're itching to get there. The others, well, they're from all over, and they know that their hometowns might as well be on Mars at this point. Nobody's going anywhere except in force."

"Thank you, Sergeant Major. Please give my compliments to the men for hanging tough these past weeks. They've gone through hell, but they've got to go a little farther."

"I'll do that."

"We'll be on the move at eleven hundred hours on the fifteenth. Make sure they're ready. I don't intend to stick around any longer than necessary."

They saluted. Lee watched Turner leave the command post, thankful he had the man on his side. The old-timers were the battalion's bedrock, the centurions of the Army. If they fell, they could not be replaced.

They would go to Fort Drum. After that, maybe Florida. Maybe not. What happened next didn't really matter at the moment. Just getting to Drum was going to be hell.

First, they had to fight their way out of the Greater Boston area with its population of five million. The short hop to Route 90 was dense with crazies.

Route 90 would take them all the way across three hundred fifty kilometers of open highway through or near ten large cities and countless small towns: Framingham, Worcester, Chicopee, Springfield, Westfield, Albany, Schenectady, Utica, Rome, Syracuse. Some were controlled by military, others had gone dark and were considered hostile zones.

They could make the trip in two or three days of hard driving if nothing stood in their way, but it was going to be a running battle. Nearly a million people were along the route just in the major metropolitan areas alone. Lee's battalion didn't have a million bullets.

The drones and Apaches were key. The drones would recon the road ahead. The Apaches would provide overwatch and security for the column. The Apaches would lay the wrath of God on any major opposition force observed out in the open. After an hour and a half in the air, though, they'd have to land on the highway for refueling and maintenance.

The urban areas would be a different story. The battalion would have to find a way around them or make a hard and fast run straight through, shooting anything that moved. From here on out, they were taking no chances.

War movies often made it seem as if soldiers charged into battle without extensive planning. Lee knew that intelligence was the key to mission planning, and planning was the key to mission success. Officers were trained to accomplish their missions at minimal risk. Heroism, the stuff of movies, was something else. Individuals had it, not

organizations. And even then, heroism was only for those rare times one really needed it, and it was done without thinking.

If Lee had his way, they'd accomplish their objective with as little fighting as possible.

The problem was intelligence was never perfect. Plans often failed. And the enemy was everywhere, resourceful and determined.

Once the battalion reached Syracuse, they'd cut north on Route 80 and go about a hundred kilometers up to Fort Drum where, Lee hoped, they'd find survivors and resources.

If the soldiers found their families infected and waiting with weapons they found on base, they'd all end up exploring a new level of hell together.

And if they didn't find resources, Florida would become a pipe dream.

They'd end up scavenging.

Once an army did that, they stopped being an army.

He wished Walker had never handed him these damned silver oak leaves.

"Colonel?"

Lee smiled. Still unused to the rank, it had taken him a moment to realize he was being addressed. "Yes, Major?"

Walker didn't smile back. "Major General Brock is on the line, sir. He'd like a word."



## THIRTY-THREE.

---

**A** RUNNING BATTLE on the streets of Cambridge. A single ragged squad against a city gone mad. They bounded in two groups of six, leapfrogging by sections. One fired while the other ran. They dropped bodies with a sustained rate of fire.

Wade's M4 ran dry. He patted his vest. Two mags left. "Reloading!"

Harvard Stadium was surrounded by green space—wide open, no cover—but they'd made it to Soldier's Field Road without contact. They crossed Eliot Bridge, the Charles River below jammed with dead bodies and boats packed with refugees and crazies. The hellish screaming and crackle of gunfire at Harvard Stadium faded to a dull roar as they jogged north into Cambridge.

Ahead, a massive hospital had been demolished by missiles. A vast wall of smoke rolled into the sky above the wreckage. Fresh Pond Parkway was carpeted with red brick, white dust and flattened vehicles. The Apaches had done their work there, just as they had at Christ Hospital.

For a while, they didn't see any Klowns. Then their luck ran out.

The crazies came from the east. Swarms of them fleeing the big fires. They ran at the soldiers from front yards and parking lots.

The M4's recoil hummed against his shoulder. *Crack crack*. Brass rang on the asphalt. A body dropped, a woman coming at them swinging a shovel. Then another.

Wade stumbled. His ankle hadn't had time to heal, and it flared with pain at each step. Rawlings put her arm around him and took some of his weight.

The bulldozer was gaining on them, a big yellow John Deere machine with glaring headlights. The squad's rounds pinged and sparked off its massive steel blade. Klowns hung off the sides, waving spiked bats and Molotov cocktails.

Young set up his SAW and started hammering. One of the crazies tumbled off. Otherwise, the fire had no effect.

"Cease fire!" Wade called. "Save the ammo!"

Young glared at him as if to say, *Who are you to give orders?* But he did as he was told.

The bulldozer was coming fast.

"Gray! Hit it with the two-oh-three!"

Gray kissed a forty-millimeter grenade and loaded it into the launcher tube attached to his carbine. He took careful aim while the squad halted to provide security. "Firing!"

The bulldozer's cab exploded in a massive fireball. Bodies cartwheeled through the air. The smoking rig veered off the road and plowed into a cluster of abandoned vehicles with a metallic crash.

The soldiers sent up a ragged cheer. They were panting with exhaustion. At last, night had come. The men flipped their helmet-mounted NVGs over their eyes. Wade

did the same. The world brightened and shrank to a bright green circle.

"Booyah," Gray said.

"Good shooting," Rawlings said.

Gray frowned at her and spit. "Happy now, Sergeant? We had a good position back there. We could have held that place. Instead, we're out here holding our dicks."

Wade and Rawlings exchanged a glance. Was he kidding?

She said, "You can always go back, Gray."

The soldier grinned. "Why would I do that? This is my squad, Nasty Girl. You're a fucking reservist." He pointed at a blocky building in the distance that looked like a school. "We'll hole up there for the night."

"That's a no go," Wade told him. "We've got darkness on our side. We need to find a car dealership or something and get some vehicles. We'll be back at Hanscom by morning."

Gray grinned. "You can always go on ahead by yourselves."

He started walking toward the school. The rest of the squad followed. They were smoked. Whether they were stopping for the night or pushing ahead, they needed a rest.

Rawlings touched Wade's shoulder. "Let's move."

They had to stick together, and they had no time for a pissing contest.

Gray signaled the squad to a listening halt outside the school. They heard nothing. He smashed a window with the butt of his carbine. The squad piled into a classroom. They cleared it and the hallway beyond then barricaded the door.

Wade sat on the floor and propped his swollen ankle on his helmet to elevate it. The right side of his face felt heavy and foreign, as if his cheekbone had doubled in size and turned to rock. His disjointed muscles protested every movement. His body felt broken.

Fisher sat next to him and lay on his side with a groan, shivering.

Rawlings sat on his other side and removed her helmet with a sigh. "We'll get some vehicles in the morning."

"No, we won't," Wade murmured with his eyes closed.

"Don't give up on me, Private Wade. We can do this. Don't worry about Gray. His M203 made him the hero of the hour. But he can't lead this squad. He couldn't lead ants to a picnic."

"We barely made it three clicks in two hours. We burned through most of our ammo. Tomorrow, we'll be traveling again in broad daylight, fighting for our lives. There won't be any chance to find vehicles. Besides all that, by morning, I'll barely be able to walk."

"We can leave tonight," she whispered. "Rest up. Hit the road."

"We have to stick together. Maybe Gray was right. We shouldn't have left the stadium. We left good men to die back there."

"We would have died with them. What would be the point of that?"

"We're dead anyway. At least at the stadium, we could have died with some honor."

"Screw that and screw you. You can't put that on us. We tried to get them to leave. Staying was their choice. Their blood isn't on our hands. Me, I'm not interested in

suicide. Where's the honor in that? I'm not interested in dying for something." Her hand probed until it found his. "Right now, I'm a hell of a lot more interested in living for something."

They held hands in the dark. For the first time in weeks, Wade felt a sense of calm. He'd reached a decision. He'd tell her. She deserved to know.

"Even if we make it, I'm not sure I'm going back," he said. "All my friends are dead. Sergeant Ramos is dead. He wasn't like a father to me because my dad was nice, but he cared. He was tough, but it was because he cared. All he cared about was keeping everybody in the squad alive. He saved my ass more times than I can count in Afghanistan."

He paused and went on, "I remember this one time, the Taliban totally lit us up. A textbook L-shaped ambush. Men went down instantly. Our lead element was cut off from the rest of the platoon. I dove behind a log and couldn't raise my head. A PK ripped that log to shreds. Somebody shouted, 'They got Esposito! They got him!' Then Sergeant Ramos ran past me. We all got up to provide cover fire. A couple of Taliban had Esposito down in the gully. He was wounded, and they were dragging him away as a prize. Ramos chased after them, shot them down, and brought Esposito back. I don't know how he did it. But it was something to see. It was really something."

Wade paused again, lost in the memory. "He was like that. He gave the orders, but we always came first. He has a sister and a nephew here in Boston. He wanted to protect them because they were the only family in the world he had left. He could have walked off the job, but he stayed. He put us first. He put the Army first. And now he's dead. He died in a fucking hospital we had no business being in. Now his family is stuck in this city. I tell you, if I get out of this, I'm going to pay him back. I'll go Elvis. I'm going to find them and protect them."

Rawlings squeezed his hand. "I understand."

"You do?"

"Yeah. But don't do it."

"No?"

"We need you, Wade. I need you. Come here." She touched his head and guided it to her shoulder. She stroked his hair.

"I'm so fucking tired," he said. His mind began to slip away.

"Sorry to interrupt, lovebirds."

Gray grinned down at them, still wearing his NVGs.

"Wade, you take first watch."

"Go to hell, Gray," Wade told him.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep in seconds.

## THIRTY-FOUR.

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**H**ANSCOM AIR FORCE BASE. Oh-dawn-hundred. Already hot and humid. The day was going to be a scorcher. First Battalion kicked off their fartsacks and got to their feet.

Lt. Colonel Lee searched for the big sergeant the men called John Wayne.

Sergeant Andy Muldoon, First Platoon, Delta Company. His squad was a rough bunch of bad apples. He had a reputation of taking misfits and turning them into hardened killers. He'd served seven tours on and off in Afghanistan and had been decorated three times. The Taliban knew his name, and they'd been afraid of him. The war had turned him into the type of man who knew he could never go home. He was on American soil again, but home was gone.

He and Lee had history in Afghanistan. They held no special love for each other. But Lee needed his help.

Lee found the sergeant sitting on a crate with his back against a palette of bottled water, whittling a piece of wood into what looked like a chess piece. Lee once again found himself impressed with the man's colossal size; he was a virtual giant. His squad loitered around him with their shirts off, trading desserts from MRE pouches, lifting weights and sharpening their big knives. A boom box pounded out Iron Maiden's "Run to the Hills."

"Sergeant Muldoon, a word."

The big sergeant squinted up at him. "Captain Lee. Or is it Colonel Lee now?"

Lee crouched next to him. "Your men are fit? Ready to move?"

Muldoon grinned. "Always. You tracked me down just to check up on me?"

"They don't look like they're in a state of readiness."

"They're ready."

"There's a mission."

"There always is, Colonel. The second I laid eyes on you, I knew you needed my help."

"Believe me," Lee said, "I don't like it any more than you do."

"Then it must be a real choice mission, one you wouldn't do yourself."

"I'd do it if ordered, and you wouldn't see me bitch."

"You really think you're better than me, don't you? Now that you're in command, you need somebody to do your dirty work for you, so you don't get dirty yourself."

Lee sighed. It was like Afghanistan all over again. The mission that went wrong in every way possible. The kid. The long hours spent under the hammer. What happened between them there had turned into a never-ending pissing match that had no respect for decorum or rank. But Muldoon was the best man for the job he had in mind, and as always, the mission came first.

"No, Sergeant. We're all just different tools for the job. And when did you start caring what I think of you? You might be surprised to know I came here for your skills, not your morality." He paused then added, "And definitely not for your personality, in case you were wondering."

"All right, Colonel. Fair enough. Give it to me. Straight, if you don't mind."

Lee took a deep breath. "Major General Brock knows we've pulled out of the city. He says we work for him now. And he's pissed about us blowing up the hospitals. Real pissed. He wants us to fall in line, go back to our original positions, and hold whatever ground we can."

"Yeah, well, he's nuts. So?"

"So he said he'll prevent us from leaving Massachusetts by whatever means necessary."

"Which means what, exactly? Talk is cheap."

"Our drones identified two companies of infantry moving west out of Newton along Route 90."

Muldoon grunted. "That's only like ten, twelve clicks from here."

"Most are on foot. Fuel must be a problem for them. But they have some vehicles. Humvees. A few five-tons."

"Armor?"

"Negative."

The sergeant snorted. "Doesn't sound like a fair fight to me. Let them come."

"It's an opening move. Brock wouldn't have sent them if he weren't committed. More are probably on the way. He's got four thousand men in the Greater Boston area. Armor, airpower, arty. We can't watch them all. In any case, it's a fight we don't want even if we can win it."

"You know, there's another way out of this."

"What's that?"

Muldoon grinned. "We hand you over and join the Guard."

Lee stared the man in the eye. "Is that what you want to do?"

"Nope. Just throwing it out there. Because it sounds like what *you* want is for me and my boys to go down that road and risk our lives slowing them down." He spit a stream of tobacco juice onto the ground. "Fighting our own guys."

"Like I said, I'm hoping there won't be any fighting."

"You want the road blocked."

"That's right."

"It's six lanes of highway."

"I'm sending the engineers with you. They'll handle the demolitions."

"You'll be blocking the route to Drum," Muldoon noted, "if we're going that way."

"We're not," Lee told him. "Change of plans. We'll be going west along other routes. Try to bypass some of the major cities. Fewer people, fewer problems. No National Guard."

"Smaller roads. They'll be blocked in places. Slow going."

"The alternative is a pitched battle with Brock."

"Sold. So let's leave then."

"We're not ready. We've got stragglers coming in, and we're still packing equipment. We can't leave anything for the crazies. If they hoof it, the Guard may get here sooner than we're ready to egress. We need time."

"And you want me to buy it for you."

"That's right."

"It's doable."

"There's more. The drones are picking up big movement among the infected. A lot of them are coming this way. So you might have company out there."

Lee didn't tell him about Radio Scream. *Radio Scream*, the voice on the FM dial rasped, *where we pay to play*. An infected engineer had figured out a way to take back control of the broadcast from Mount Weather's override. The infected DJ preached his sadist gospel between "songs" that consisted of grating laughter and the screams of tortured innocents.

Last night, the DJ told his listeners that Tenth Mountain was leaving the playpen without permission and that they should go and say bon voyage to the brave boys in uniform and personally thank them for their service to this great nation. He kept at it all night. By morning, the westward migration out of the burning Boston core began to shift. Toward Hanscom.

He also didn't tell Muldoon that he suspected Brock had put the word out. If First Battalion wouldn't stay in Boston, Brock would use them while he had them. He'd flush the infected out and send them all into Tenth Mountain's guns. If true, the man was utterly ruthless. Desperate. Smart. Either way, they weren't getting out of here without a fight.

"Great." The sergeant leaned back and put his hands behind his head, revealing massive biceps. Lee knew Muldoon sometimes fired an M240 machine gun with one hand as a party trick at the firing range. "It's a choice mission. All right. Convince me."

Lee frowned. "Most real soldiers find a direct order convincing."

The man laughed. "I'm about as much a real soldier as you are a real colonel. Sir. Times have changed. My boys and I could walk out of here anytime I say so."

The man was right. There was no use trying to argue otherwise. "Then why don't you?"

Muldoon leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. His eyes blazed. "Because I *am* a real soldier. Sir."

Lee grinned. "That's what I thought."

"And we're coming back. Don't think we're a bunch of Dixie cups."

Dixie cups. Disposable. "I don't dislike you *that* much, Sergeant."

"Tell me something, Colonel. How far would you go for a mission? Where do you draw the line?"

Lee said nothing. The meeting was over. Both had gotten what they wanted. Lee had the best man he could find to screen their withdrawal, and Muldoon had a mission and his pound of flesh.

## THIRTY-FIVE.

---

THE CONVOY OF MILITARY VEHICLES roared down a barren stretch of I-95—Humvees and a couple of five-tons filled with engineers and hastily packed explosives.

Sergeant Andy Muldoon rode in the point vehicle. He listened to the bang of the rig's iron suspension, the V8 diesel engine's grind, the hum of the big tires gripping the road. The Humvee was a perfect example of what he liked about Army life: nothing comfortable about it, no frills, everything utilitarian, designed to last and built to survive. There was a kind of Zen in it.

He'd experienced real hardship in Afghanistan: constant fighting, hunger and thirst, scorching heat and numbing cold, days and nights without sleep, scorpions and giant spiders and bugs that ate you alive. The cherries came, and he taught them war. Some got hit; most went home different men than when they'd arrived.

Muldoon couldn't go home. Civilian life, with its comforts and niceties, kicked his ass, chewed him up, and spit him out. In the real world, he woke up with night terrors and flinched at loud noises. He drank all the time and got into fights. He'd pound some poor guy over nothing. He'd woken up in jail in Vicenza and Rome. His relationships with women tended to be stormy and short. Post-traumatic stress disorder, they called it. After some time home, he always asked to go right back into the shit. The Army psychologists kept an eye on him. But in the field, all his anxieties melted away. He grew stronger. Afghanistan was the devil he knew.

America had been turned into a war zone. Nobody was going home. It sucked for everybody, but he personally didn't mind it. It somehow felt right. Again, the devil he knew. In the new age, war wasn't the anomaly; the real world was. War had become the norm. And he wasn't just surviving. He was thriving. He could puzzle over that for years.

The only problem was serving under Harry Lee.

*The Tomcats dropped them into the bush outside a village in Korengal Valley near the Pakistani border. Taliban and foreign fighters crossed over from Pakistan each year to take on the American infidels. Lee had solid intel that a Taliban commander was going to be traveling along a certain route at a certain time. Muldoon's squad was supposed to do the grab. Lee came along to see if he could get something from the man before they handed him up the ladder for interrogation. Muldoon was happy to get the mission. It was real Special Forces shit.*

*They lay all night and most of the next day under cover in a gully, waiting for their guy to show up. Instead, boy walked straight through their area of operations; he couldn't have been older than ten or twelve. The soldiers hunkered down. Lee looked at Muldoon.*

*The kid had no business here. From the way he kept glancing around, he'd either spotted the Americans or had already known they were there.*

*The captain drew his finger across his throat. He wanted Muldoon to kill the kid. Muldoon refused the order.*

*Thirty minutes later, a heavy machine gun thudded on the ridge above, chewing up the ground around the squad's position. Another opened up from the west. They were surrounded. The air filled with flying metal. The Taliban threw rocks down at them, hoping the Americans would believe they were grenades and leave cover.*

*Captain Lee called in fire mission after fire mission on the ridges above. The big arty rounds rained down, but the Taliban didn't quit. They smelled blood. After an hour of fighting, every weapon in the squad was suppressed. The insurgents could maneuver almost at will. They bounded down the rocks, closing in for the kill with their AKs. The Taliban didn't take prisoners.*

*Apaches roared overhead, like their cavalry ancestors, in the nick of time. The gunships had to drop their ordnance practically on the squad's heads to keep them from being overrun. The Taliban were that close.*

Lee blamed Muldoon for the failure of the mission. Lee thought the kid had spotted them and reported their presence to Taliban in the village.

Muldoon believed the kid hadn't just shown up at that exact place and time by chance, not in all that wide open nothing. The Taliban had already known they were there. The kid was probably just being used to collect intel on their unit. A spotter. Besides, he didn't kill ten-year-old kids unless they were pointing a gun at him.

But Muldoon understood why Lee had given the order. Hell, Muldoon sometimes questioned whether he'd made the right call. That was one of the fucked-up things about war—you often faced horrible moral choices that sucked no matter what you did. You ended up plagued with guilt because you *didn't* cut a kid's throat.

His problem with Lee was that the man hadn't called off the mission, even after there was a good chance they'd been spotted. If there was any chance of the Taliban leader rolling through, Lee wanted to nab him, regardless of the risk.

Lee was a good soldier, a good officer. His intelligence work had saved lives. Muldoon respected that. But the man was a fanatic when he had a cause. Fanatics got good men killed.

Not today. Not if Muldoon could help it. He and his boys were coming back alive.



## THIRTY-SIX.

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**W**ADE AWOKE FROM A LONG, dreamless sleep with a start. He raised his head from Rawlings's shoulder. She stirred.

"Rise and shine," Gray said as he kicked the men awake.

The soldier had taken off his helmet and blouse and wore his tactical vest over his T-shirt. He had large stains around his armpits. He grinned under mirrored sunglasses, chewing gum. He looked like something out of *Soldier of Fortune*.

*The asshole's starting to enjoy this*, Wade thought. *Thinks it's fun.*

"On your feet, lovebirds. It's oh-dawn hundred."

Sunlight streamed through the closed blinds. The room was hot. Wade felt like crap. But he'd slept the whole night, from dusk to dawn, perhaps for the first time in weeks.

The classroom had a whiteboard and little desks. Books and art supplies filled the shelves. Posters hung on the yellow walls. School was out. He wondered if kids would ever go to school here again.

Rawlings gave him a bleary smile. "Morning, Private Wade."

He gave her hand one last squeeze and let go. "Thanks."

"You should know I don't let every guy I meet sleep on my shoulder."

He smiled at her. "I got your back today, Sergeant."

"Eat up," Gray said. "We got a long day. Get your calories."

A soldier burned up to six thousand calories a day in a combat zone. The Meals-Ready-to-Eat, or MREs, provided twelve hundred calories. They'd have to eat every chance they got. The men tore into the pouches and ate their breakfast cold. Gray turned to Wade with a big, satisfied smile.

*What does he think, I'd tell the men NOT to eat?* Wade was already tired of the pissing contest. If Gray wanted to be in charge, so be it.

Then he realized Gray wasn't looking at him. As far as Gray was concerned, the pissing contest was over. He was looking at Rawlings. The soldier licked his lips. He had a thing for her, then. Love or lust, it didn't matter. Gray was going to be a problem.

The men hauled themselves to their feet and checked their gear. They cleaned and reloaded their weapons and counted magazines.

"Let's move," Gray said. "We'll stay on this side of the highway. Check out some houses and see if we can find a few working vehicles. Get the fuck out of here."

The squad geared up and filed out the window. They moved quietly through the residential neighborhood, flashing hand signals to communicate where they were going and what they saw. Wade limped after them with Rawlings, refusing her help. He had to pull his own weight.

They found plenty of abandoned vehicles, but none of them would run. Even the vehicles still drivable and that had keys in the ignition had been drained of gas by

scavengers.

The houses turned into low-rise apartment buildings with retail stores on the bottom floors. The squad filed down the middle of the street, weapons ready, faces pale and drawn. Dead bodies drew clouds of flies. Loose litter fluttered in the breeze. Most of the houses had Xs painted on the doors; the area had been ordered evacuated by the government. Graffiti invited them into some buildings and warned them out of others. The air smelled of smoke.

Wade and Rawlings exchanged a glance. They were going to die there, and they knew it.

The Klowns had disappeared, but they were still here. They'd gone somewhere to sleep. The sun was rising. Soon, they would wake up and come out to play.

Fisher and Brown fell out of formation and waited for Wade and Rawlings to catch up.

"He's looking for a fight," Fisher said. "He's going to get us killed."

"Dude thinks he's Lord Humungous," Brown added.

Wade caught up to Gray. "We should find somewhere to hole up until it gets dark."

"Get back in line, Wade."

"At least get out of the middle of the street. We're sitting ducks out here."

Gray glared at him and spit his gum onto the road. "All right." He signaled the squad to get onto the sidewalk and keep moving.

Wade grunted with each step. They were going to need to find some vehicles soon. He doubted he'd be able to walk all the way to Hanscom.

Brown said, "We can't shoot our way there. I got just one mag, that's it."

"We should break off on our own," Fisher said. "What do you think, Sergeant?"

She said, "I think all options are on the table at this point."

Wade opened his hand. *Stop*. He tapped the guy in front of him and repeated the gesture. The soldier passed the message up the line to Gray, who turned with a frown.

Wade cupped his hand to his ear. *I hear something*. Waved his hand to the ground. *Get down*. A listening halt.

The squad crouched behind the line of cars parked against the curb.

Gray looked at Wade and mouthed, *What the fuck?*

Then they all heard it—a distant rattle growing louder by the second.

Wade fixed his bayonet to the end of his carbine. A vehicle rolled up the road, scattering trash. The shiny BMW convertible was driven by a middle-aged couple wearing black sunglasses and smiling as if out for a pleasant Sunday drive in the city. The man wore a brown suit and tie, the woman a polka-dot dress.

The rattling sound was chains. The car was dragging dozens of bodies shredded into hamburger over miles of road. The stench of death struck the soldiers as the vehicle passed.

The car came to a halt. The V8 engine roared. The couple's heads swiveled toward the squad's position.

The man grinned and said, *"I smell lunch."*

Gray popped up and opened fire. The Klowns jerked as blood sprayed across the windshield. They slumped in a smoking mess.

Gray turned to the squad and patted his weapon. "I'm sick of this shit. No more skulking—" He stopped and gaped up at the buildings across the street.

Wade followed his gaze. Dozens of grinning faces looked back at him from the windows.

Gray sighted on one of them. "Contact."

Wade barely heard him over the tramp of feet on asphalt coming from all directions.

"What are we going to do?" Rawlings asked.

Wade looked at her. "We're going to get that vehicle."

A body landed heavily on the car in front of them, setting off its alarms.

"Christ!" Fisher screamed.

"Contact!" Gray repeated.

A few shots. Seconds later, the scattered gunfire turned into a steady roar.

The Klowns came up the street. They poured out of every building and rained from the windows like human missiles. One ran up to Wade's group and emptied a handgun. Wright flopped backward onto the sidewalk, shot through the face. Wade returned fire, the rounds thudding into the Clown and making him do a jig before collapsing. Young propped his SAW against the hood and started hammering anything that moved.

Gray dumped a grenade into the entrance of the building on the other side of the street. It detonated with a *BOOM*, vomiting smoke and burning bits of wood onto the street.

Gray pumped his fist. "Booyah!"

"Fuck!" Brown sat on the ground with an arrow through his shoulder.

"Man down!" Fisher cried.

Another body fell from the sky onto Young, knocking him down. The SAW slid off the hood. A moment later, a man popped up with it and opened fire at the squad.

Three soldiers were thrown through the plate glass window behind them.

Wade sighted on the Clown, but his gun jammed. Rawlings fired, and the man dropped. Wade spared a quick look around while he cleared the two rounds stuck in the firing chamber. The street was filled with laughing maniacs falling under a rain of hot metal. Klowns in the store behind them hacked at the wounded soldiers with hatchets and machetes. Gray was shooting grenades down the street as fast as he could load them. Half the squad was out of action. The rest fired at close range or were locked in hand-to-hand combat. A Molotov cocktail burst in their midst, catching Steele's legs on fire. If they didn't move, they were going to die.

Brown was laughing as he tried to stand. *"It hurts soooo good!"*

"To the car!" Wade shouted. "Get to the car!"

Rawlings led the way, spearing Klowns with her bayonet. Fisher picked up Brown's carbine and fired wildly. Wade hobbled after them, dropping Klowns with aimed fire.

Gray was already at the car. He yanked out the bodies and dumped them onto the sidewalk. He got in. "Hurry up!"

Wade, Rawlings and Fisher leaped inside as Gray stomped the gas pedal. The car lurched into the crowd, slamming into Klowns and hurling them down the street. A woman tumbled over the vehicle and crashed onto the road behind them.

Wade pushed Fisher off him and looked back. The last few members of the squad unloaded everything they had before the infected swarmed over them. A grenade exploded in their midst, ripping through the crowd and covering them all in a pall of smoke.

The Klowns brayed like hyenas as they closed in with knives to collect their trophies.

## THIRTY-SEVEN.

---

**M**ULDOON RADIOED THE CONVOY to halt. His squad piled out of the Humvees to clear the area. Lee was right; there were a lot of Klowns in the neighborhood, all heading to Hanscom. The squad went to guns on them. Muldoon called out the combat engineers.

This was a good place to break the road. On the right, the ground sloped past the guardrail through some trees to the Cambridge Reservoir; on the left, a patch of thick woods. And in between, six lanes of highway dotted with abandoned vehicles and wrecks. The job was to blow some massive craters all the way across. A piece of cake for the engineers.

They placed ten M180 cratering demolition kits at regular intervals on the north and southbound lanes of the road. More on the shoulders and median.

Each kit weighed a hundred pounds. A big rocket was mounted on a tripod and aimed at the ground. A second shaped charge was attached to one of the tripod legs.

A radio signal would trigger the rockets to fire and strike the shaped charges. The explosion of the shaped charge would rip a hole in the road about six feet deep. The rocket would then propel through the back blast into the hole and detonate at the bottom.

Then BOOM.

A crater ten to twenty feet across would appear, a massive trench across I-95 that would stop any vehicles.

Muldoon's squad pulled security. They watched their sectors but frequently glanced at the engineers like excited children waiting for Christmas. The explosion was going to be a hell of a thing to see. The boys did love their toys.

The only problem was time. The whole thing was taking way too long. The engineers were bickering over proper placement of the demolition charges. Muldoon thought Lieutenant Donald would put an end to it. Instead, he took out a tape measure.

"Lieutenant!" Muldoon called. "We're on the clock here."

Donald frowned. "This has to be done properly, Sergeant."

"We're going to have company real, real soon."

"My orders were to do it *right*."

"Contact!" Ramirez said.

Muldoon grabbed the binoculars. "What you got?"

"A whole lot of Nasty Girls, Sergeant."

He brought the view into focus. Visibility was poor. Smoke drifted like fog across the highway from fires burning on the other side of the reservoir. A column of vehicles and soldiers emerged from the haze. Humvees. Five-tons belching exhaust. Bands of infantry hoofing it.

No armor. Good.

Still, it was going to be a close thing.

He raised the binoculars again.

A swarm of Klowns emerged from the trees next to the highway. The usual freak show of ragged clothes, self-mutilations, homemade weapons, grisly trophies and naked captives on leashes. They raced across the southbound lanes toward the National Guard.

*Come on!* Muldoon wanted to scream at the Guard. *They're coming right at you!*

They did nothing. They didn't even appear to notice the Klowns.

Ramirez shook his head. "What the hell are they doing?"

*You're about to be attacked, you idiots! Fire! Fire!*

The Klowns ran straight at the Guard and fell into step with the column.

Muldoon felt the blood drain from his face.

*Aw, shit.*

## ***THIRTY-EIGHT.***

---

**M**ULDOON RADIOED TO BASE and requested an airstrike. The Apaches were engaged in the west. They'd get there in thirty minutes. He didn't have thirty minutes. He terminated contact and considered his options while his squad watched him anxiously.

Donald gave him a thumbs-up. "Good to go, Sergeant!"

Apparently, the engineer didn't have a problem cutting corners when two companies of heavily armed, homicidal maniacs were rolling up the road.

"Hooah, sir," Muldoon said.

They could blow the road and leave. Mission accomplished. The National Guard would be slowed, and the battalion could get out of Dodge. Then Lee would send a few whirlybirds to put the Klowns out of their misery with a little precision-guided whoopass.

Only that wouldn't happen. Lee wouldn't spend the fuel and ordnance. He'd be totally focused on getting the battalion to Fort Drum in one piece. And that would leave two companies of infected soldiers free to wreak havoc on what was left of the Greater Boston area. Muldoon couldn't stomach that idea.

Brock had real problems on his hands. He wasn't going to stop Tenth Mountain from leaving the state. He apparently didn't have enough force available to even try. When the man threatened Lee, he'd been bluffing, hoping to deter him. As if anything deterred Lee.

It was all on Muldoon. He had nine shooters plus the engineers, three Humvees with two fifty-cals, a Mark 19 grenade launcher and some explosives. It was like a puzzle. The trick was making all the pieces fit so they added up to the annihilation of two hundred infected soldiers.

"What are we going to do, Sergeant?" Ramirez asked.

His little command could put a dent in the opposition force, sure, just before it got slaughtered. Those men down the road had all the weapons and training they had before the virus got them. They were organized. The Klowns were working together in large groups. They could maybe even strategize.

"Sergeant?"

There was one thing the Klowns didn't have, which was any interest in force protection. They didn't care if they were killed or if their unit was destroyed. All they cared about was getting to the party. That was what made them so tough, but also, under the right circumstances, weak.

He grinned. His men relaxed and grinned back.

Muldoon said, "We're going to fuck them up."

## THIRTY-NINE.

---

THEY DROVE FAST. Gray grit his teeth and yanked the wheel. The car wove through mobs of infected, past scenes of madness and savagery. The Klowns turned and acknowledged them with the delighted surprise of seeing old friends.

Wade looked behind them. The crazies chased them in a laughing stampede. Ahead, men on ladders were busy crucifying a cop to a telephone pole.

"Problem," Gray said.

Rawlings glared at the back of his head as if looks could kill.

"Jesus Christ," Fisher said. "What the hell now?"

"Gas," Gray barked. "We're on the reserve tank."

"We're not far from Hanscom," Wade pointed out. "Maybe a mile."

"Might as well be a hundred," Fisher said.

The car sputtered.

Gray pounded the wheel. "End of the road."

They were on a residential street lined with abandoned cars and broken glass. They got out and stared at the flood of laughing maniacs pouring up the road. Nobody gave the order. They knew what to do. They started firing.

The carbines threw rounds downrange into the mob. Crazies dropped and were trampled by their fellows. Gray's grenade launcher thumped. The grenade burst in their midst, sending bodies flying through a cloud of smoke.

"Bounding!" Gray shouted and took off.

Fisher stopped firing. He looked down at his weapon and released the empty magazine. "Shit, I'm out!"

"Move!" Wade shouted.

"Bounding!" Fisher ran.

The mob was getting closer by the second.

Rawlings shoved him. "Go! I'll cover forward!"

No time to argue. He went, hobbling as fast as his ankle would take him.

Gray and Fisher had stopped behind an SUV lying on its side in a pile of glass in the middle of the street. Wade turned. He didn't see Rawlings.

Gray pumped another grenade into his launcher and fired. "Come on, Wade!"

"I don't see her!" Then he heard it—gunfire from one of the buildings. Rawlings was leading them off.

Fisher was already running. Gray tossed a smoke grenade onto the street. He grabbed the back of Wade's blouse and pulled him along.

They stopped after a hundred meters, gasping for air, and looked behind them. None of the Klowns had followed them through the smoke.

"I don't see Rawlings," Wade said. He wanted to scream it.

Thunder rumbled ahead of them, the steady boom of gunfire. Hanscom.



"Let's stay focused here," Gray said. "We're not home yet."

"Fuck you!" Wade shouted. "You killed her. Just like you killed the others."

Gray spit on the ground. "I didn't kill anybody, and you know it."

"If you'd listened to her, we might be out of this already."

"She wasn't one of us, Wade."

Wade glared at him. He'd never wanted to kill anybody so badly in his life.

"Hey, guys!" Fisher called from ahead. He whooped. "Check it out!"

Gray turned and walked off. Wade limped after him. At the top of the rise, they saw Hanscom.

Hundreds of infected ran through the smoke surrounding the compound walls. Machine guns hammered from sandbag positions. In the guard towers, the Mark 19s thumped. Across the Hescos, the lightfighters propped their weapons and kept the fire hot.

"How do we get back to base?" Gray asked. "What do you think?"

Wade laughed. "I think it's beautiful."

Gray turned and frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

Wade smiled.

## **FORTY.**

---

**T**HE KLOWN ARMY ambled down the road. They grinned like wolves, hunting, always hunting. They saw the flare pop in the murky sky. They drooled at the sight.

Bullets pinged off the road. Men tumbled laughing to the ground. The infected looked around and saw the Humvee on the road, its fifty-cal rocking. Tracer rounds flashed in their eyes. The Humvee pulled a U-turn and sped off down the highway. The Klowns gave chase. The vehicles pulled ahead of the infantry, who jogged along, grinning at the prospect of fresh meat.

They passed a series of tripods in the road. The crazies knew what it meant but didn't care. A rocket streamed out of the nearby trees and struck one of their five-tons. The vehicle exploded and rolled, spilling bodies and equipment. The Klowns pointed and laughed.

Then the demolition kits detonated.

Muldoon blinked at the blinding flash. Vehicles and bodies tumbled in the blast. A wave of dirt reached for the sky and tumbled back down. A massive cloud of dust hung over the shattered road.

His Humvees emerged from concealment and rolled onto the shoulders of the highway, fifties rocking. The Mark 19 showered the wreckage with grenades.

Muldoon picked up the radio. "Sparta Ops, this is Sparta Six. Time to retrograde. Out."

The Humvees took off the down the road. But Muldoon and his boys weren't finished.

The vehicles pulled onto the shoulder and idled. Muldoon got out with Ramirez. They climbed the shoulder and lay on the road. Ramirez set up the machine gun. Muldoon scanned the dust cloud with his binoculars. A crowd of infantry jogged out of the dust.

"Man," said Muldoon. "They sure are dumb."

Ramirez looked at him. "They're crazy."

The Klowns passed two abandoned vehicles. Muldoon squeezed the handheld detonator. The electric pulse traveled down the length of wire to the Claymore mines placed on the ground next to the wrecks. Each had embossed on it, FRONT TOWARD ENEMY. The blasting caps activated, detonating the C4 behind a matrix of seven hundred steel balls set in resin. The balls flew out of the daisy-chained mines at four thousand feet per second.

The Klown soldiers disintegrated in a massive spray of blood and body parts.

Ramirez sighted on the soldiers in the rear who'd escaped the blast, and started hammering. Tracers flashed downrange. The Klowns charged, firing as they moved.

"Some human wave shit here," Ramirez said. "Fuckers think it's World War One."

The Humvees rolled out of concealment and engaged with their fifties and the Mark 19. They walked their fire into the crowd of Klowns. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Muldoon had been right. The Clown soldiers knew their tactics. They knew to lay a base of fire before you maneuvered. Fire, maneuver, fire, maneuver. Sweep the enemy's position with grazing fire to suppress them, then flank and cut them up with enfilade fire. Tactics 101. But the virus couldn't wait. It cared nothing for self-preservation. It didn't understand the concept of victory or defeat. It only wanted to play. It wanted to play *right now*.

Muldoon and Ramirez heard a whistle and put their heads down.

**WHAM!**

The ground shook. Dirt pattered against their helmets. The Klowns were firing mortars. Soon, they'd have them zeroed.

A Javelin missile streamed toward one of Muldoon's Humvees. The vehicle rocked as it flew apart in a blinding flash.

"Fuck me," Ramirez said. "That was Burke and Zeller."

Another mortar round crashed into the trees. Splinters rained down.

Bullets chewed up the asphalt in front of them. The Klowns had set up a machine gun.

"Time to retrograde," Muldoon said. He radioed his men to bug out.

They got up and ran to the burning Humvee. Bullets pinged off the road around them. The heat forced them back.

"They're dead, Sergeant," Ramirez said.

Another mortar round blew a smoking hole in the highway as they ran to the next Humvee and piled inside it. As they drove off, the men seemed subdued but oddly jubilant. They'd finally won. They'd finally done something good in this nightmarish conflict.

Muldoon called in his situation report and requested the whirlybirds come in to mop up the Clown mortar team. He didn't feel jubilant at all. Those were American soldiers they'd killed.

This kind of winning felt like losing. Like he'd cut the Afghan boy's throat after all.

## FORTY-ONE.

---

**G**RAY LAY IN a heap on the bloody asphalt.

Wade stared down at him. *What happened?*

The man was alive one second, bleeding from a dozen wounds the next.

Fisher backed away from him. "Aw, *no*, man."

*What's with him?*

Fisher took another step. "No. Please. Please don't."

Wade looked down at the bloody knife he held. He looked at Fisher. "You'd better run," he hissed.

"Why'd you do that, Wade?"

Wade laughed. "*He wasn't one of us.*"

Ramos's parting gift had taken its sweet time, but it had finally taken control. Little worms in his head. Little puppet strings.

He screamed: "*Run!*"

Fisher yelped and ran off.

Wade looked down at the body and chuckled. He'd stabbed Gray in the kidneys. He licked the blood off the blade and stabbed again. He kept stabbing and stabbing.

Just before Gray died, they looked into each other's eyes and laughed as brothers.

There was an old saying among warriors: *Make pain your friend.*

He hadn't really wanted to kill Gray, but the organism in his body demanded everything. It didn't appreciate divided loyalties. It wanted it all.

It wanted to see the whole world burn.

That would be so very freaking *hilarious*.

He heard a splash of gunfire. Below him, his brothers and sisters charged into First Battalion's guns. He wanted to join the party.

Then he remembered Ramos's family. They still needed attention. The sergeant would have wanted it that way.

The laughing virus in his skull thought that was a very awesome idea.

"Aw, Wade," Rawlings said.

He wheeled. At the sight of her, he burst into long, breathless peals of insane laughter.

*HAAAWWWW*

*HAAAAAWWWWWWW*

*HAAAAAAWWWWWWW*

He knew why the infected sought out those they loved. The pain was so exquisite. It hurt soooo good.

"Sorry," he managed. "*Rawlings.*"

She leveled her carbine. "I'm sorry, too."

*"Shoot me."*

She shook her head, tears streaming down her face. "I don't think I can, Private Wade."

*"Shoot me now."*

"Tell me where Ramos's family lives."

He doubled over laughing.

She said, "I'll take care of them. I'll do that for you."

He grinned and held up his knife. *"Gonna make a hole. Make it—"*

He lunged.

She fired.

## ***FORTY-TWO.***

---

**S**ERGEANT SANDRA RAWLINGS watched Boston burn.

The big fires had radiated out of South Boston and were consuming everything in sight. The South End was gone. The skyscrapers of the Financial District pumped tons of smoke and ash into the already blackened sky. Chinatown had been burned to a cinder. Back Bay-Beacon Hill was gone, as was Fenway-Kenmore. The fires were eating Dorchester and Roxbury.

Across the Charles River, Charlestown was a black, smoldering ruin, and the conflagration was spreading across Cambridge and Somerville.

The firefighters were all dead, the police department overrun. The hospitals, considered centers of infection, had been destroyed from the air. The Governor held East Boston and little else. From Newton to Quincy, Major General Brock and his struggling battalions were steadily being pushed back toward Cape Cod.

Boston, drained of life, its soul already departed, was being cremated and with it everything that had defined Rawlings as a person. It was a city no more; it was becoming an idea. A symbol. For Rawlings, a memory. She remembered growing up in Dorchester. Living in one apartment after another around the city as an adult. Jobs in various offices in the Financial District before she became a paramedic working out of Christ Hospital. Proud service in the Massachusetts Army National Guard. A tour in Iraq. Then fighting hard, one day at a time, trying to save the city from plague, a plague that had devoured the city long before fire took its turn.

All of it was gone. Nothing left to fight for. Only the plague lived on.

Still, she turned toward the sound of the guns. Tenth Mountain was revving up its vehicles, getting ready to move. She wondered where they were going. Was anywhere safe?

Rawlings admired that they were still willing to fight at all. Those Tenth Mountain boys didn't know when to quit. Maybe they could use a girl like her. She had a handful of dog tags to deliver. That, and their story. As the sole survivor of the group, she was the sole witness to their end.

Once more into the breach?

Hell, no. She wanted to find a house somewhere and take off her boots. Then, she'd get some water and soak in it for a while. After that, she'd sleep the sleep of the dead.

Nonetheless, Sergeant Rawlings found herself walking down the hill toward the sounds of the gunfire, searching for something that was still worth fighting for, living for. Maybe she'd find it outside Boston. Maybe she'd become a mountaineer after all.

## ***FORTY-THREE.***

---

**T**HE FORWARD OPERATING BASE at Hanscom was stripped down, packed up and ready to roll at Lt. Colonel Harry Lee's command. Fighting vehicles and their endless train of logistical vehicles, carrying everything from water to fuel to ammunition, lay coiled like a giant metal snake at rest. The big engines idled. Apaches sat spooled up on the runway. A crowd of civilian vehicles, refugees led by a group of police officers and firefighters, waited their turn at the rear.

A small column of Humvees and five-tons rolled into the compound.

"I believe that would be the prodigal son returning, sir," Walker said.

The lead vehicle pulled up in front of Lee. Sergeant Andy Muldoon stepped out and grinned. "Miss me, Colonel?"

"Not at all," Lee said. "But I'm glad you're back. Outstanding results on that mission."

"Not that outstanding. I lost Burke and Zeller."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"And there's still a mortar team back there. I requested air support."

"That's a no go, Sergeant. We're about to move out here."

"Or I could go back and do it myself. Sir."

Muldoon wasn't bluffing. Lee and Walker exchanged a glance. Lee nodded, and Walker went off to give the orders.

"Anything else, Muldoon?" Lee taunted. "How about a foot rub and a nice hot bath?"

Muldoon surprised him by saluting. "No thanks, sir. I hear you suck at giving foot rubs."

Lee shook his head. "Dismissed. Get the hell out of my sight."

As always, Lee got what he wanted, and Muldoon got his pound of flesh.

Sergeant Major Turner approached with a woman in uniform.

"We picked her up outside the wire, sir. Dead on her feet. She gave us these." He showed Lee a handful of dog tags—Tenth Mountain. Turner added, "She and a group of our guys fought their way here all the way from Harvard Stadium. She's the only one who made it."

The woman saluted. "Sergeant Sandra Rawlings. Alpha Company, 164th Transportation Battalion. The Muleskinners. Massachusetts Guard."

"Well, Sergeant Rawlings, it sounds like you got a hell of a story to tell."

The woman blinked at him. She was obviously trying hard not to lose it.

Lee said, "I'll bet you kicked some major Klown ass out on that road, soldier."

Rawlings stiffened. "You got that right, sir."

"Hooah. Here's the deal, Sergeant. We're moving out. You have a choice. You can stay here, or you can come with us. We're leaving Massachusetts."

"If it's all right with you, I'll tag along. There's nothing for me here anymore."

Turner escorted her to the medic platoon.

Walker turned to Lee. "I saw her first, sir."

Lee shook his head. "You're a real piece of work, Major."

Walker smiled. "Thank you, sir."

It was time to move out. The battalion had lost a few good men. Otherwise, it was a good day. They'd won a few small victories, they'd crawled out from under the hammer, and they had a new mission. They hadn't saved Boston, but they were still in the game. They could still do some good. Somewhere. Maybe Florida. Maybe they'd go there after all and save America from this horrific, unending nightmare.

First, they had to get to Fort Drum.

Lee climbed into his Humvee and gave the signal.



## ***FORTY-FOUR.***

---

**A**MERICA. Boston.

The city was burning, its residents fled. The once proud metropolis had been turned into a charnel house overrun by infection.

The infected were gathering into an army. Boston belonged to them now, but they wanted it all. They wanted to make the whole world laugh.

Bedford. Hanscom Air Force Base.

First Battalion was on the move at last.

The lead vehicle crashed through the gate. The next opened fire as it exited, then the next. The giant metal snake growled and uncoiled and flowed onto the road.

West to Fort Drum. Home of Tenth Mountain Division.

All around them, the world was dying, but Tenth Mountain would go on fighting.

Their mission: to save what was left.

The retreat had begun.

COMING SOON:

**THE RETREAT, EPISODE 2  
SLAUGHTERHOUSE**

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**Diary of the Displaced**  
**Book 1**  
**(The Journal of James Halldon)**

**Glynn James**  
**Digital Edition**

**Official Author's website**  
<http://www.glynnjames.co.uk>

\* \* \* \* \*

**Introduction**

James Halldon wakes up in a strange and dark place, surrounded by endless junk and debris.

He has no idea where he is, or how he got there.

No food.

No water.

No light.

Almost no memories of his past.

And there are things moving in the darkness around him. Things that growl.

And daytime never seems to come...

\* \* \* \* \*

**It has to start somewhere...**

I have no idea where I am, and I don't know what day it is. I could guess at how much time has passed since I arrived here, but other than that, I'm lost.

It was January, I think. The 8th sounds about right to me, but I'm not sure.

I'm trying to write down everything that has happened so far, otherwise this isn't going to make any sense to anyone but myself, if it even makes sense at all. Not that I'm expecting anyone else to read this, but you never know do you?

Do I fill in the previous days with notes, or put it all in today's entry? I settled on the latter. Thought it would seem disjointed otherwise.

So here we go, I guess.

**Two days ago**

I remember coming round. It was dark, very dark. I could vaguely make out some shapes around me, but not much else. I was lying on something uncomfortable, or several things. It all seemed to shift and collapse under my weight. My head hurt, and I knew that there were bruises all over me. I could feel them. How I got them, I have no idea.

It took a while to get over the initial panic. I scrambled around blindly, trying to find something solid in the mass of crap that was shifting underneath me. I clumsily cracked my knee on something hard and metal. It was large, maybe the size of a microwave or a television, but it was difficult to tell what it was in the dark. I nearly screamed as the agony seemed to shoot round my whole body, which was already aching from the mysterious bruises. In the end, I lay there for a long time, trying desperately to stay as still as possible, rolled up in a ball and gritting my teeth, waiting for the pain to abate.

I felt my pockets, but my cigarette lighter was nowhere to be found. The only damn source of light available to me, and it had gone. I did find cigarettes, wallet, car keys, a pen, and a packet of mints, but no lighter and no mobile phone. I tried to search the ground around me, stumbling over whatever all the stuff was, but that turned up nothing. I'm certain I had a lighter and a phone.

My hands were cold and numb, although the place didn't feel that cold. There was air coming from somewhere, a breeze with a chill to it that smelt musty, mouldy, rank and somehow old.

Negotiating my way through the debris was slow going, but after an hour or so of crawling in the dark, I found a solid barrier. It was a wall of some sort; at least that is what it felt like, but it was hard to tell in nearly complete darkness. I must have crawled about a hundred yards in that time and I had lost all sense of direction.

I sat holding my head until a wave of dizziness passed. Exhaustion weighed heavily on me, but it was a relief to find something solid as a reference. Hopefully my eyes would adjust soon, and I would be able to figure out where I was.

In the end, sleep overcame me. I don't remember it happening. I guess my body had just switched off.

Total shutdown.

### **One day ago**

When I awoke I was leaning against the wall, and my whole body was crying out with aches and pains. Where was I? What had happened to me? It took me a few moments to recall the last day or so. I tried standing up, but my legs were numb. I could have just stayed there and moaned, but I could see where I was now. Fear always wins, it would seem.

My eyes had adjusted to the level of light. Not much, but it was enough to make things out nearby, to see shapes and shadows. Details weren't clear.

All around me was a mass of junk, twisted and broken furniture, scattered books and children's toys, all damp and rotten. A few feet away stood a monolith of a refrigerator that looked like it must have been fifty years old, its doors missing. There was something nasty growing on the inside. Endless piles of junk. I shuddered to think about what might be crawling underneath it all.

Then there was the wall. My assumptions had been right to some degree. It was made of solid stone blocks and extremely old. The blocks were at least three feet long and about a foot tall. The material was like slate and the rough edges felt sharp. There was no visible cement between them, just a thin groove. Those bricks, if you could call them that, had to weigh a tonne. They were like nothing I had ever seen. In the limited light, it looked like the wall went on and on in both directions. Upwards, there was no sign of the top of the wall, or a ceiling of any kind, just darkness.

I called out a few times, but there wasn't much of an echo, only a dull and hollow sound. I was convinced that I had to be in a building of some kind.

All I had to eat was the half empty packet of mints, so I was getting hungry. They tasted strange somehow, but I put that down to my mouth feeling like I'd been chewing on sandpaper.

Felt like crap, so I lay there for most of the day. I couldn't sleep, and even resting didn't make the tiredness go away.

Woke up and finally felt a bit more alive, managed to retrace my crawl through the rubbish, approximately, until I found what I thought was the microwave again.

Found my lighter! It was about a foot away from the microwave, under a table that was covered with broken glass. Underneath that was a pile of cardboard boxes and my lighter. Searching for it took me a while, and I had nearly given up, but then I put my hand straight on it.

It didn't work, must have run out of fuel, though it was wet, so that may have stopped the flint. Don't know. I never considered how they work.

### **Day 3**

So this is where I am so far. After two days of mostly sleeping in the dark and feeling ill, lethargic, and hungry, I'm nearly ready to keel over. The mints didn't last long, and they just left me feeling even hungrier than before. I know I've slept a lot, so there is a possibility that I'm actually on day four, even five. All of this doesn't seem to matter, though.

Lack of food is going to become a problem soon. My guts are churning and making some very odd noises.

My lighter works now that it has dried out.

Found this journal. It was stuffed into a box not far from the cardboard pile. I was so close to throwing it on the fire along with anything else I've found that is flammable, but hesitated, which I'm glad of. I decided that I would write in it instead. I used to keep a diary at home, and I wrote in that every day, well, nearly every day, so it's nice to be able to record stuff again. My pen still works.

There appear to be pages torn out of the front of the diary, so it starts in February. But since I don't know the exact date for sure, that doesn't seem to matter.

So. The fire. I gathered up the pile of cardboard this morning. Yes, I know, there is no way to know what time it is, but I'm referring to the early part of my waking hours as morning, just to keep me sane.

There were piles of it, a lot of it wet, or rotten, scattered all over among the junk. With a bundle of it tucked under one arm, I headed back over to the wall, taking it

slowly, and only using the lighter occasionally, just to get my bearings. It takes at least ten minutes of sitting there in the dark for my eyes to re-adjust.

Even with the light from the clipper, the top of the wall isn't visible, and neither are the ends of the wall in either direction.

There was a decent sized area cleared now, where I had slept for the last two nights. I threw most of it back over the junk, as far as I could chuck it, which isn't very far, because my muscles burn in protest every time I try to do anything even slightly strenuous.

The ground in here is mud and stones, so this place hasn't been used in a while.

The cardboard on the top of the pile that I had made was reasonably dry, and caught fire quite quickly. When it did I was given a glimpse of something that I wasn't expecting. I stood there for about five minutes, trying to take it all in.

To start with, I guessed that I wasn't inside a building. This place is much bigger than that, unless it's an exceptionally large building.

Stretching out for probably two hundred feet, there was endless junk strewn across the mud floor. It wasn't just a small pile of rubbish. The stuff went on and on, and was piled much higher than my head in many places.

The wall wasn't a part of a building of any kind. It was a free standing thing about a hundred feet high, crumbling into ruin in different places. In one direction it ends about two hundred feet away, collapsing into rubble, but in the other direction it goes on for what seems like for ever.

The light from the cardboard seems to reach a lot further than I had expected. This is good. It gives me space. Somehow I think that light travels farther than it should in this place. I'm not certain how that works, but it's strange. Even a tiny glow illuminates quite a large area. Maybe it's my eyes?

I had only just begun to get a grasp of where I was when the fire started to die out. The cardboard had burned through quickly, and as the fire started to die down, I rushed about, trying to find some more fuel to keep it going, but only found more cardboard. At least it gave me enough light and a bit more time to explore the junkyard while I searched for better fuel.

There were bits of broken furniture scattered about, but most of it was rotten or wet and I didn't think it would burn well. I piled some nearby anyway, hoping it would dry out. Does wood take a long time to dry out? I've no idea.

An hour later, after ten more piles of cardboard and an assortment of broken furniture, I found it.

A pile of logs.

Big ones with some of their branches still on them.

Someone must have cut up and dumped the majority of an entire tree there, maybe even more than one. Fortunately a lot of it was dry and cracked, as though it had been sitting there for a long time. I cleared a bigger space surrounding my bonfire, stacking up the smaller logs that were easy to carry at the edge of the clearing.

It took another hour to move the logs to my makeshift camp, between keeping the fire going and lugging the heavy bits of trunk. Some of it was far too bulky for me to



drag, so I left it where it was.

I called out into the darkness again, still no answer. I've tried this a few times now, but nothing comes back, not even my own cries. I'm starting to think that I am a long way from other people. Where could this place be? Underground? Surely this isn't under the city? You can't hide a place like this, can you?

Feeling very weak.

#### **Day 4**

Woke up ravenously hungry.

It's my fourth day without food or water, so I'm really not feeling good at all. I'm losing weight quite rapidly now. Thank God for that extra Christmas-holiday fat. I would never have been able to lose weight like this normally.

The campfire had gone out while I slept, but there was still a large pile of logs, at least enough not to run out in a hurry.

Lit the fire again, and then made a torch out of a piece of furniture leg and a torn piece of cloth from the remains of a sofa. I needed to find food, and fast, so I headed further out into the junkyard, with my torch in hand.

The microwave isn't a microwave at all. It's this strange, seemingly solid block of metal. Well, it appears to be metal. It doesn't open. Well, not in any way that I can see. There's no door or handle or anything like that, just a solid block. I tried moving it, out of curiosity more than anything, but there was no way I was going to budge it without help.

I spent most of the day clearing the area near my camp. Once more I tried to find something edible, with no luck.

#### **Day 5**

Found something to drink! There was a stack of fizzy drink cans underneath the wreckage of an old wardrobe, about sixty cans of it. It's nasty, cheap cola, but at least it's wet and gives me some energy. I think the cans are quite out of date, but even though the taste is a bit odd, just like the mints were, it still feels good going down. Stopped after I drank the third can. I need to make them last.

The wardrobe drawer proved useful to carry the cans back to camp.

There is so much junk scattered all over the place. It makes me wonder where the hell it all came from, and who put it there. Was this some half used underground landfill site that was long abandoned?

Now that I've got a bit of energy, I've started to build a sort of temporary shelter. I need to have a base to work out of; this place is pitch black, and if I end up stuck in the middle of nowhere, in the dark with no way to find my way back to my supplies, I'm dead. It may sound crazy, staying here and setting up camp. I keep thinking that I should up and move on, keep walking, that soon I would find a way out. But there is something in the back of my mind telling me that it would be a bad idea, that escape isn't only a few hundred yards away.

But what if I'm wrong? What if just round the corner there is some hidden exit that I haven't yet seen?

Made a rough sack out of some old curtains I found.

Still haven't found my phone.

The fizzy drink is four years out of date. I found a readable "consume by" date on one of the cans. I'll never turn my nose up at cheap fizzy drinks again, ever.

## **Day 6**

Lots to write today, but where to start?

The day began with a stint collecting more wood, breaking bits of furniture that I have found, and carrying it back. I'm taking it slowly, well aware that cans of fizzy drink are not bad for energy, but without any food, I'm not running on full batteries.

I found a stack of chairs, dozens of them, all made of solid wood and nearly new. It's bizarre what you find in this place. I used them with the curtain material, and managed to make a batch of torches that I can easily carry with me. They don't burn for long though.

Kept one of the chairs to sit on.

The first sounds came while I was hauling a broken sofa back to the camp, a task that is not easy while holding a torch. I was dragging it along with one hand, making my way one yard at a time, when I heard the sound cut through the noise that I was making.

It scared the hell out of me. A howl, and quite a distance away, though it is hard to tell in this place, where nothing echoes properly. It didn't sound like any dog I have come across, and I've never heard anything else howl. Do foxes howl? The sound was much too deep to be a dog, almost how I imagined that a wolf would sound, but we don't have wolves in England, do we? I don't think we do.

The howl was answered by another one, this time much further away. I wasn't sure of the direction the noise was coming from, or even the exact distance.

I finished dragging the sofa back to the camp and leaned it against the wall, until I could clear an area for it. My torch was nearly out at this point, its last flickers nearly dying as I stuffed some cardboard onto the fire.

The howling had stopped.

Panicking, not wanting to lose the fire, I fumbled with the torch and managed to get the fire going again. There was a lot of smoke at first, but finally it went up in one giant whoosh.

There it was, five yards away, teeth bared at me, growling. I knew by its reaction that I was saved only by the campfire; the minute the area was flooded with light again, the creature screeched. It was a high, piercing sound, like a siren, like it had been hurt. It belted away through the junkyard, yelping, to disappear into the darkness. It only took a couple of seconds. The creature moved at a speed I could only imagine. It must have been going thirty miles an hour through the piles of junk. I hate to think what it could move like on the flat, without any obstruction.

I'll describe it as best I can, but it's not like anything I have ever seen, and I only got a brief look at it while having what felt like a heart attack. I panicked and nearly fell on my backside into the fire as I tried to back away from it.

Take a large dog, such as a Rottweiler, and mix it about half and half with a tiger or a panther. Give that a mouth of teeth twice the size they should be, cover it with grey

and brown spiky hair, and lots of what look like scars, and you have roughly what just bared its teeth at me. I would swear that there were bits of flesh hanging off it, or its fur was all torn.

The eyes, they were huge, and they didn't look natural. At least not to me, they didn't. Maybe the thing is accustomed to being in the dark? I presume this from the way it reacted to the light.

How something like that has developed is unfathomable. Is that the right word? There is nothing that I am aware of that is like it. It must be indigenous to this place, wherever this is. That reinforces my belief that I'm a long way from any place I know. Damn, I don't know if I'm even on Earth any more. You read stories about people vanishing, and folk tales of travel to other places, but they are stories, aren't they?

I'm going to keep the fire burning continuously now, if I can.

I think I'm going to need a weapon.

### **Day 7**

A wrecked car has appeared about twenty feet from my camp, smashed up against the side of the wall. It's a complete write-off, and there is blood all over the torn and twisted upholstery. There are also, well, bits. It wasn't there before I went to sleep.

Jammed into the driver's footwell, which is utterly crushed, is a leg. Well, part of a leg. To make it worse, the bone sticking out of the leg is perfectly flat at the end, as though it had been cut or sawn off.

Yeah, not kidding you, this thing arrived without making a sound. It was just there when I woke up. I can't even tell what make or model the vehicle is, it's in that much of a mess.

From the apparent damage at the front of the vehicle, I would say it didn't crash into the wall here. It's not the right shape. How the hell a wrecked car got here, though, I don't know.

I noticed a smell of petrol wafting in the air, which would be great news if I could get my hands on it somehow. That is if the tank is still intact. Petrol would be useful right now. I keep glancing at the leg in the footwell and shuddering.

Managed to force open the boot of the car. It took about two hours, but was worth it. Inside was a large suitcase, unusually heavy and ticketed to go to Namibia, Africa. Mr Adam Samuels.

Hauled the suitcase back to the camp. I struggled, but couldn't open it.

I wonder if that is Mr Samuel's leg in the footwell.

Genius.

Went back to the car and carefully pulled off some of the damaged metal panelling. There are lots of sharp bits that break off easily, to make cutting implements. A large piece of the frame came away, twisted and jagged at one end.

It didn't take much effort to wrap more pieces of the door panelling round the thing and some of the curtain material around the handle, tied together with cloth strips cut from the sofa.

Now I've got myself a nasty weapon if the dog thing comes back.

It only occurred to me afterwards that I could have cut myself badly while pulling at all that sharp metal. There aren't exactly any ambulances around here.

As well as the mace (I think that's what they are called) I've managed to put together two usable, makeshift knives using the braces between a chair leg and a large piece of sharp metal from the wreck.

Before going to sleep, I used a large piece of furniture wood to pry open the side of the car, so I can access the petrol tank. I've got nothing to put it in at the moment. Really, I just wanted to make sure it wasn't leaking out anywhere. It's not. The petrol smell must be from the battered remains of the engine.

One last thing. It occurred to me that the Dog thing was probably hungry, and a raw leg from the knee down, sitting in this vehicle, might bring it here again. I think I heard movement in the distance once or twice, but while I've got the torches burning and the campfire lit they seem to be leaving me alone (I'm presuming there is more than one from the answered howls that I heard).

Decided I couldn't risk it and took half an hour to pry open the footwell with the hefty bit of wood, wrapped another piece of curtain round my hand and pulled out the leg.

Damn thing. It squelched as it came free. I nearly threw up, and probably would have done if I had anything but fizzy drink in my belly. Chucked it over the wall. Barely. I was so glad I didn't need a second try at it. There's not a lot I can do about the blood, without wasting fizzy drink. Most of it seems to have dried anyway.

As a last thought before I sleep again, I must venture out, soon, but I need to know that I can survive it first. I can't stay in this camp for ever. For all I know, there might well be a way out a few hundred yards away.

## **Day 8**

The suitcase, when cut open, contained some men's clothing. It's all a bit too large for me, and the trousers don't fit too well, but at least I've got some clean pants on now. There are towels. All I need now is some water! Sun tan lotion and sunglasses - you're having a laugh. A roll-on deodorant, so now I don't smell too bad. Can DogThing smell it though? I never thought of that before I used it. More pens, Namibia travel guide, mouthwash. Damn mint flavoured.

Stomach is burning with indigestion from only cola cans to live on. I need to find something solid soon otherwise I'm going to have some serious stomach problems, or worse. I think at a guess I must have already lost two stone. Oh well, doctor said I needed to lose weight.

I'm hungry, but somehow not as hungry as I think I should be after so many days without food.

### **Preparation for travel (Inventory).**

Shoulder sack - slightly better fashioned with bits of leather from the car upholstery now that I have something to cut with.

2 knives.

Wicked, nasty, DogThing-killing mace.

15 torches.

Bundle of curtain material to make more torches.

10 cans of fizzy drink.

Cigarette lighter - still part full.

Journal and pens.

Small chunk of sofa foam for pillow.

Small towel and deodorant?

Mouthwash? Too much to carry.

Ok, the torches last about half an hour, roughly. The longer ones last maybe three quarters of an hour, if I'm lucky, so I reckon that I have something like seven hours travel time, three and a half hours each way. I'll have to judge it by the torches.

My stomach is beginning to give me real problems now, so although I should probably leave after I've slept, I'm going to head out today.

### **Day 9**

A breakthrough! I've discovered something that might be food. I know that sounds odd, but I've never seen a three-foot-tall mushroom before. I stood there, wasting torch time, for about ten minutes, wondering whether it was edible or not. Eventually I decided that the risk was worth it. It's a pale white colour, which made me think of the mushrooms that you can buy in a supermarket. I hope I'm right. I chopped it up and stashed it in the sack. It's not heavy stuff, and there is quite a lot of it.

I'm getting too far ahead, so here we go.

Right, I've slept again, so it's pseudo morning once more. I need to catch up on yesterday's excursion. Again, quite a bit to write, but the first thing is I'm back at the camp.

### **The Day 8 Expedition**

#### **Hour 1**

For the first hour I walked about a quarter of a mile through the debris, marking my journey by re-arranging junk, mainly by pulling away a pile of wood or rubble, and laying out a marker pointing back to the previous one. It was slow going, but if I get lost in here, I'll be in serious trouble, even with my supplies. Although there is a lot of junk there are also some wide, open spaces between it, so I don't have to climb over junk the whole way.

There's so much mashed-up stuff here that it could be the rubbish dump for a whole town. Most of it is either scrap yard junk, or piles of broken furniture. That's good, though - at least I'm not running out of firewood any time soon. There's no rotting filth that I can see, so this isn't landfill refuse.

Found what I can only believe is DogThing's droppings, dotted about all over the place, but no signs of DogThing itself, yet.

As I travelled further away from the wall, the rubbish started to thin out a bit, but there were still quite big piles of it all over the place. I spotted a damaged shopping trolley that I decided to take back with me. The wheels didn't quite work, but I thought they could be fixed, with a bit of force.

## Hour 2

Headed further out, and at about half a mile, I reached the edge of the rubbish. It thinned out into only infrequent larger piles and odd scattered bits. I think I saw at least five washing machines.

I abandoned the shopping trolley. It was too knackered to fix and wouldn't push straight, plus one of the wheels fell off.

It was at this point that I found the mushrooms. They were dotted around quite a distance from where the ground was covered with scrap, so maybe they favour open areas. The biggest one that I found was about three feet tall and probably the same diameter across the hat. I spent a while examining it before deciding to cook it back at the camp.

## Hour 3

As I was wandering along, trying to figure out what the hell all this stuff was doing here, and hoping that I would see some glimmer of inhabitancy in the distance, I came across the most bizarre thing yet.

It was sitting there in a large clearing, rubbish and junk of all kinds stacked up around it.

The first glimpse I got of it was the shape, and the eyes. Or what I thought were eyes. They reflected off the torchlight, and I nearly turned to run, but it didn't move.

It was about six yards high, four wide, and as long as a truck. After meeting DogThing, I was positive that this was some gargantuan mutant rhino, or something equally horrendous and deadly. I thought that I was about to die. Then I noticed something up on top of its head and it looked like writing. I took one step closer. Stupid, I know, but I nearly fell over laughing at myself in amazement at what was there.

*Number 12.*

*Not in service.*

It was a London bus.

I was about to walk over to it and investigate, when I heard the scream. Crazy. I have been on edge ever since I arrived in this place, and the one moment I relaxed, something caught me ill prepared.

I've never heard anything that made my spine tingle as much as that scream did. It was stomach wrenching, long, and turned into a gargling wail seconds later. For the second time in as many minutes I nearly fled the area, but something, call it instinct if you want, compelled me to try and help. That scream was coming from something or someone in extreme distress, and I knew what I was going to do, even though every part of me said it was stupid.

I ran. Not quite blindly, but barely able to see ten yards in the darkness. My torch in one hand - newly lit only a few minutes before, and my mace in the other.

The scene unfolded far too quickly for me. The fight was going on much closer than I had first thought. I had barely run twenty yards, and there they were. DogThing was cowering back, blood streaming from a wound in its side. Looming over it with weapons in their hands, were two people.

I had hoped it would be possible, and for a few brief seconds, I felt relief. There were other people here. I wasn't totally alone. But that relief was short lived as I ran towards the scene to help them.

The stench hit my senses as I got within about ten feet and then one of them spun round to face me. What I saw staring out of that hooded cloak was disgusting and terrifying beyond anything I've ever seen in my life.

It may have once been human, but what was left was unrecognisable enough that I was unsure whether it was male or female. Most of what was visible of the creature was either rotting or falling off. It began lumbering towards me. Its face was half missing, and I could see its jawbone shining in the torchlight, hanging on by one or two putrid strips of muscle. The cloak opened a little as it moved, and underneath I could see maggots falling out of holes in its flesh and scattering across the ground.

I've seen a lot of Living Dead films, and I know a zombie when I see one, or at least what a zombie really looks like. Let's face it, you watch the films, but it never occurs to you that you might meet one in person, let alone two.

I was surprised enough that the slow, shuffling thing nearly got to me before I reacted. It tried to hit me with the broken stick that it was carrying, an improvised club, but I took a couple of steps back, waited for it to get in range, bit back the fear, and tried my new mace, ironically made to defend against the creature I now fought a common enemy with.

I lunged at it, missed and stumbled forward, nearly dropping the torch and the mace. This stuff always looks easier in the films.

Fortunately I wasn't the only one with little control over my faculties. The zombie was having a hard time turning round, so I had time to wind up and aim the second attempt. As I pulled back my mace for another shot, I was vaguely aware that yards away, another violent struggle was going on between DogThing and the other zombie.

Impact. Its head erupted into pieces, splattering the ground behind it. My arm jarred, and the pain shot all the way up to my shoulder. I stumbled backwards. The creature still staggered in my direction for a moment, but then collapsed sideways, tumbling to the ground with a wet thud.

Behind me, the furious growling from DogThing had stopped, and silence came once more. I spun round to look, swinging my torch in front of me, realising that I still had DogThing and possibly another zombie to deal with, but DogThing was just watching me warily, and nudging the remains of the other cadaver, which it had quite literally torn to pieces.

Both zombies down, and only a demon dog to deal with. We stood there, ten feet between us, breathing heavily, watching each other.

I backed away slowly, leaving it to poke around the bodies. I needed to be away from the scene. I staggered back to where the bus was and leaned against the side.

It took me a while to stop throwing my guts up and get my breath back. I called out in frustration, into the darkness, but only a dog and two smashed up zombies were there to listen to me.

Realising that I was over my expedition outward time, I rushed some of the way back, and decided to leave investigating the bus for another time.

DogThing followed me back to camp, keeping its distance.

Today (Day 9) I spent the most of the day shifting some of the junk in an attempt to build some kind of wall defence round my camp.

It occurred to me as I sat back at the camp that I was wrong about DogThing being hurt by the light. I suspect it merely frightened him.

Yes. I decided to presume that DogThing is a male. He sat just on the edge of the light of the campfire for most of the evening, watching me warily, and licking his wound. It looked a bit nasty. He's not looking at me hungrily, so I'm trying to presume that I'm not what he has planned for dinner.

### **Facts I've learned about DogThing**

DogThing likes roasted mushroom. So do I.

DogThing isn't a Living Dead thing. The bits hanging off him are just dirty bits of crusty fur. I am beginning to wonder if I have found an ally in him. I hope so. I certainly don't want him as an enemy, and sleeping might be easier with him nearby. Knowing that there are zombies and things wandering around in here doesn't set you up for a peaceful night.

He doesn't smell anywhere near as rank as I thought he would.

He doesn't like the campfire light.

Back to the mushrooms. They don't taste that much different to supermarket mushrooms, and they come in bigger bits. I guess I will find out quite soon if they are edible or not, but for now it feels good to have something solid in my stomach.

I can't believe I have been here over a week.

### **Day 10**

I haven't slept for hours now. It may be day 11 for all I know, but I'm sticking to a day being between each sleep (ish). Thank God for DogThing, and to hell with zombies.

I'm about to try and get a few hours sleep, but I doubt very much that it's going to happen. If it wasn't for DogThing, I would be dead right now. There is no doubt about that.

I was fast asleep and far too comfortable, with a belly full of mushroom and a warm fire going. I guess I nearly forgot about the dead things that I had fought earlier that day.

The noise made me start, and I sat bolt upright, fumbling for a torch, and my weapon. That same long, drawn-out moan resounded nearby, and I could hear DogThing having a go at something. The unwelcome and familiar sound of zombie flesh ripping, and the grating of DogThing's teeth, was too close for my liking. He must still have been sitting nearby when they arrived.

The torch flooded the area with light, and I wished it hadn't, because I could see at least four of them loping slowly towards the camp. Worse still, there were bits enough to account for a few others, strewn about the clearing that DogThing had been lounging around in. They don't leave a lot of blood, just bits.



I hurriedly put my torch into the fire again, stoking it frantically to try and get more light into the area. It was almost out, and I didn't have the time to lug any wood from the pile. I managed to get it going a bit more, and regretted it straight away, as the fire roared to life and lit up the entire area around me.

There were dozens of them, at varying distances. All shapes and sizes, and at different stages of decay. The nearest to me was at least twenty feet away, and it seemed to be stuck in the junk. Most were still staggering, trying to negotiate the piles of scrap. I am so glad that they are slow, or I would have been overrun before I'd even noticed that they were coming.

I hesitated for a moment. Would I be able to fight them all off? DogThing was doing an awesome job, but me? Not a chance. My trip out earlier proved to me that I was useless with this mace. Yeah, sure, I killed it, but only after nearly landing on my backside after my first swing.

Time to run.

Time to get the hell out of here as fast as I can.

My kit was still packed from the expedition, so I grabbed it, and as much other stuff as I could carry, and made my way along the wall away from the camp, in the only direction that was reasonably clear. As I shuffled along through the rubbish, I saw that there was only one of the creatures in that direction. I figured that if I moved quickly, I may not even have to fight it.

So here I was, tucked inside the bus with the doors all jammed shut, and DogThing prowling the area outside. I was exhausted.

DogThing followed me, after sidetracking to make a meal out of one or two of the zombies along the way. I think I now know why I've not become a DogThing meal. He seems to have a taste for the living dead. Sick, yeah, but I'd rather it was them and not me.

The zombies didn't follow me. They seemed intent on continuing into the camp. I don't know where they are heading, or what has attracted them to the area, but I'm just glad it isn't me. Well, I think it isn't me. They didn't follow me to the bus, so they must have had some other reason to be there. What that was I don't know, and I don't think that I want to find out.

Need to sleep now. Struggling to write.

## **Day 11**

I'm still alive, still inside the bus, and still got me a demon DogThing patrolling on the edge of the torchlight. Can you feel love for a mutt from hell? Damn right you can. He won't come into the bus, and seems to be afraid of it for some reason. Maybe I should take heed of that, but I'm too tired.

I'm glad I made a large supply of torches now.

Anyway, back to my escape.

My exodus wasn't entirely uneventful. That one zombie that I was hoping to avoid moved quicker than expected. As I edged away along the wall, it closed the gap. I looked back, but DogThing was busy tearing into another of the monsters that had entered his clearing. I whistled, but he didn't respond. I would have called him, but I

didn't think he would answer to "DogThing" and I didn't have a name for him yet. I must give him a name, he deserves that at least.

The wall was quite low by the time I faced off against the zombie. I approached slowly, pointing my mace and my torch at it. The reek of the creature was nasty, hitting me like a cloud of gas at about ten feet. It was a massive one, not tall or anything, but fat, monstrously fat, and it had something sticking out of its stomach, piercing right through its body. It looked like it was a metal girder or something similar. Its innards were wrapped round the metal and dangling out all over the place, dragging along the floor as it stumbled about. A totally random thought entered my head, and I laughed. How odd. Here I am, faced with a horde of the living dead, and I'm laughing as I remember being told by my mum to tie my shoelaces, or I would trip on them. Did this creature ever have a problem tripping on its own guts?

For its weapon, this zombie had chosen a head. Yeah, a zombie head. It had hold of it by the hair, which was long, and drenched through with dried blood and other crap. As it swung it in my direction, the head cursed and swore at me. I think that's what freaked me out more than the obese size of the creature, that swinging, screaming head that it was trying to hit me with.

I didn't think I had much luck by ending up in this place, but luck has had a lot to do with my survival after that moment, and it played a huge role right then. I was about to step forward and try to take the thing on. Even though I was convinced that I stood no chance, but then I noticed what it was standing on. Cardboard! Another immense pile of it, spread out across the floor, and this time not drenched in muck and water. One jab of my torch and it took like a treat, and the giant zombie went up with it. I had to jump back a few steps to avoid getting toasted myself.

I've never been a hateful person, but the sheer joy at watching that creature roast was immense. So much so that I wasn't expecting the damn thing to come walking off the cardboard towards me, burning like a failed Catherine wheel as it flailed that screaming head and its other arm around in its fury. I had no choice. I dived over the wall, hit the ground hard, and then frantically crawled away. Not a moment too soon either, because barely a second or two after I tumbled away from the wall, the burning zombie came crashing down over the rock, in an inferno, and fell to pieces on the cobbled floor. The head, still on fire, rolled over towards me and came to stop a few inches from my feet.

It screamed.

Up until then I had been avoiding going over that wall. I dreaded the thought that when I got there it would be as vast and endless as the side I was living on, and there was something reassuring about sleeping with your back to solid wall. I was right to be wary.

Broken ground stretched out into the darkness, and there was no sign of an ending to the open space this side of the wall. I didn't have time to look around, and I wasn't going to go stumbling into somewhere else unknown if I could help it, so I hurried off in the only direction that I could remember. Towards the bus, leaving the zombie collapsed in flames with the putrid stench of rotten, burning flesh hanging in the air and tearing at my nostrils. The head screamed even worse insults at me as I scurried

away. How typical is that? The first time I hear another human voice, and it's not attached to a body. It couldn't even have had vocal cords.

This place is nuts.

It would seem that my memory isn't completely gone! I'm starting to get some little bits back about the day I ended up here. I think I would have remembered more, but the dream that brought it to me ended rather abruptly when the zombies arrived at the camp.

I was on my way to a major client, to talk to them about their latest order, when I hit a traffic jam. The M25 can get quite frustrating during rush hour, but it wasn't normally so congested mid afternoon, so that was unusual. Still that didn't suggest anything weird to me.

It took about an hour extra to get there, so I had phoned ahead to let them know I was going to be late. That was when I noticed my phone was getting low on charge. I couldn't find the car adapter for recharging it, and I remember making a mental note to do so later on, but I guess that the opportunity never came.

The last thing I recall was stopping off at a service station to use their toilet. I have this thing you see, call it an obsession if you will, about not appearing untidy, or being a nuisance of any kind. Turning up to a client's place and using the toilet straight away was rude. Well it was to me.

So I went to use the toilet at the side of the service station, and that's about as much as I can remember. Sometime after I used that toilet, something bad must have happened, and somehow I ended up here.

Even more interesting! This bus has a rough bed laid out on the upper deck, and a whole bundle of personal stuff tucked away in the corners. Somebody used this place as a home at some point, and from the dust that has settled over most of it, I think that it wasn't recently. It's a shame, even though it's a relief to see any signs of life here that might be human, the place being abandoned for so long, or so I presume, is another reminder that I'm alone here.

I spent most of the day hiding away in the bus, trying not to attract any more attention from the zombies, and catching up on my sleep. It was reassuring to be barricaded in somewhere for a change.

Never would have thought it, but sun tan lotion works ok as a makeshift soap. It's not brilliant, and I think it's a cheap brand, but it does freshen you up a bit. It's a shame there is only one bottle of it.

## **Day 12**

A few more zombies passed by this morning, but they didn't come too close and didn't bother investigating the bus. I don't think they even noticed it.

DogThing has wandered off somewhere. I didn't realise until about an hour ago that he had gone. There is something disconcerting about not knowing where he is.

Gave in to curiosity and tried to start the bus, but the engine didn't even turn over. Not surprising really, it must have been sat here for years. It's strange what you

become accustomed to. After fighting zombies and eating three-foot-tall mushrooms, a London bus sitting in the middle of nowhere doesn't seem so odd any more.

Found some useful things after having a rummage through all the stuff on the bus. There is a lot of random, useless junk like a box of dishwasher tablets, but I found a knife for starters. Yes a real one. It's only one of those small cheese knives with a curly, two-pronged tip, and it's a little blunt, but it's better than the makeshift knives that I botched together. There was also a torch, minus the batteries. You never know, I may come across some at some point, so I will keep hold of it for now.

In the front corner, on the upper floor, was a pile of magazines. Mostly gardening and craft ones. Some of them are over thirty years old. Behind the magazines was a small pile of books. Six of them are the same book "A thesis by Professor Adler". They look quite old and are all signed, presumably by Mr Adler himself, though I can't make out the signature clearly enough to be sure.

In a pile, in the middle of the floor, was a thick woollen blanket that was sizable enough to cover a double bed. It's quite smelly, and could definitely do with a wash, but will be a lot better than the curtain that I no longer have. Damn. I lost a lot of stuff back at the camp.

Plastic bottles. There were dozens of them, all stuffed into a massive cloth sack. If only I could find some water. Unfortunately, all of them were empty.

Hanging on small metal hooks on two of the walls was a pair of lamps. They were both empty of fuel, but if I could siphon some from the car wreck, I might be able to get them going. There was also an empty hook.

Covering most of the walls and windows on the top floor were posters from various time periods. Some of them were of bands from the eighties, and others that I'm certain go way back, possibly even to pre Second World War, maybe further.

I'm saving the best find until the end (as they say). On the bottom floor, right at the back, among all the litter (the bottom floor must have been the last occupant's rubbish bin) was a small metal box with a broken handle. Inside it was a rusty set of tools that were mostly knackered, but there is a screwdriver, a hammer, and a rusty but usable adjustable spanner. All fantastic finds. I'm getting all happy about a damn toolset.

Lingering in the back of my mind, there is an unsettling feeling that someone lived here for quite a long time, and then went off one day, never to come back. Maybe they were trapped here like me and found somewhere better, not bothering to come back? I'm not convinced of that. I think I would have come back even if it was to collect a few things. Which reminds me, I still have to go back to the old camp and salvage whatever I can, hopefully avoiding any zombies on the way. I also need to find somewhere other than this bus to stay. There seem to be zombies wandering by every few hours. I'm lucky - they either don't seem to notice me, or they aren't interested, but that doesn't mean it will stay that way.

I'm convinced that the zombies are heading somewhere. They are always walking in the same direction, and I've never seen any of them twice. Trust me, I would know. They are all grotesquely different.

The strangest one I have seen so far came past yesterday, while I was having a smoke and peering out of the window, hoping to see DogThing. It wandered by about thirty feet away, right on the edge of the light. I'm damn sure the creature had been

put together, because there were two heads sticking out at the top, and another jutting out of its waist. It had far too many arms and legs, almost like three different people had been wrapped together deliberately. The top two heads were staring at each other, like they were in shock from being attached to one another (wouldn't you be?) while the third, the one sticking out of its waist, was looking around. I'm not sure whether the two heads that were facing each other were even alive, or animate, or whatever they are.

There are only three cans of fizzy drink left. I'm surprised they have lasted this long. Either way, I'm going to run out. This is a good thing and a bad thing - if I drink much more of the stuff I'm going to end up with serious stomach problems. Not that I don't already have them. Fizzy pop is not good as a staple diet, but I've got nothing else.

From the empty bottles, I've come to two possible conclusions. Either there is water nearby, or it is so far away that whoever owned these bottles needed a lot of storage to be able to live here.

I'm going back to the old camp tomorrow, in an attempt to recover the last few bits of my possessions. I remember seeing a hose pipe somewhere in the junk, not too far from the camp, while I was hurrying on my way to the bus, so will attempt to find it.

I ventured out briefly to see if I could find anything else to drink, but I didn't go too far. I did find something intriguing though. Hidden away, behind a massive pile of empty tin cans, around the corner from the bus, was a small heap of mangled-up bicycles and prams. None of them were in a condition to be used as they were, but it did mean one thing to me. Wheels. I'm determined to fix up one of the prams to use as a cart; then I wouldn't have to lug everything on my back.

Will pass by the pile on the way back to the camp. A second reason to take a different route back there.

I hope the zombies have gone.

### **Day 13**

To say that today has been an interesting experience would be an understatement, but before I go into that I need to sort out last night's dream, in my head.

I hadn't even noticed until I woke up, that I hadn't been having any dreams at all that I could remember. I used to dream so vividly before; back in the real world (is that the right thing to call it? This place seems real). It's strange that I don't recall dreaming at all while I've been here, so much so that I'd forgotten all about it until last night.

It started off a bit vague. Don't all dreams start that way? I was on a bus that was driving slowly through London, like the world was going through one of those film clips that they play in slow motion, so that you don't miss the details they cleverly placed in there. It wasn't as slow as a film, but the dial was definitely turned down slightly. Everyone outside the bus was walking slower, and everyone inside the bus seemed to be in complete time stop, apart from me, and one old fellow who was sitting right at the front of the bus, smoking a pipe and chattering to himself.

I recognised the route the bus was taking. I'd taken it many times when I'd been working in the East End of London, years ago, back when I was just learning the trade. It always worked out easier to park up and go by bus than to drive through the streets.

As always on that journey, I watched the busy traffic outside and occasionally glanced down at my newspaper. The print in the paper seemed to be changing every time I looked at it, though I wasn't turning the pages. Then it occurred to me. Had I been there before on this bus? I mean on this particular bus.

Yes, I had.

It was a long time ago, back when I was a kid. The theatre poster stuck on the top panel over the stairs, the one slightly torn in one corner, was identical to the one I saw back then. I was convinced of it. I was very young at the time and out on a day trip with my parents, to the London museums. It was the exact same poster.

I remember the old man getting off the bus a stop before us. He peered at me as he went by, and my dad nearly leapt out of the stall behind me. The old boy just smiled at me, and pointed at the empty cream soda bottle that I had been sitting squeezing the air out of, so it made a whistling sound. I remembered him so clearly because of his distinctive appearance. He was scruffy beyond scruffy, half of his clothes in tatters, with rips and holes dotted all about him. I think his boots were held together with masking tape or something similar. His beard was long and plaited, almost like thin dreadlocks, with multicoloured string, or threads of some sort, woven into the plaits. How he managed it, I don't know, but he must have been wearing at least six or maybe seven layers of coats and jumpers in varying stages of disrepair. Finally, there was the hat. A baseball cap that had faded over the many years that he must have been wearing it, until it was a light shade of muddy brown. That hadn't stopped him from attaching about half a million tiny pin badges to it.

He had the strangest face I think I've ever seen. His nose was huge and bulbous, his eyes deeply inset and smaller than I thought was possible. To me, he looked exactly like I had imagined a goblin would appear, except grimmer, if you could get grimmer than a goblin.

"You finished with that, son?" he had said, with a wink. I just stared at him and held the bottle out. I imagine that my mouth was wide open, my jaw ready to bounce off my lap. He took the bottle, winked at me a second time and said "You'll be fine," then he gave me another toothy grin, and shuffled off down the stairwell.

I woke soon afterwards, startled by a noise outside, but the dream was still fresh in my mind, and the images overlaid reality for a few seconds. From where I was lying, huddled in the blanket (which was damn warm if a bit smelly), I could see all the other posters on the walls. There, stuck right where it had been back then, though partially covered by a few newer posters, was the same one, ripped corner and all.

*Evita. Starring Marti Webb.*

There it was, right in front of me.

I sat there for a while, going over it in my head, and although I'm uncertain, I think that was how it happened. It's not all in my imagination.

The noise outside repeated once more. Shuffling, scratching. It brought me round in a second. I lit up the torch as quietly as I could, and tentatively peered out of the window.

DogThing was shuffling about at the front of the bus, and although he only stayed for a few minutes before heading back out into the darkness, I've never been so

relieved to see a mutt from hell.

An hour later, and I was out the back of the bus, cooking mushroom on a small fire. I was tempted to cook inside the bus, but if the thing went up in flames I would be homeless. I figured I would hear a zombie coming in plenty of time.

I was wrong.

It was already past me and moving off into the darkness when I became aware of it, just visible on the edge of the light cast by the fire. This one was only small and carried its own severed arm in its other hand. It went on, lumbering its way past, into the darkness, and off in the direction of the old camp, and the wall.

Where were they going?

I hadn't been totally stupid. The mace was leaning against the side of the bus, barely a foot away from me, and I leapt round the fire to grab it. I was still standing there, shaking and nervous as hell, thinking that the thing would come back again, when two more shuffled into the light. They were leaning on each other, or maybe one was dragging the other along. The shorter of the two had a leg dragging behind it, barely attached. They completely ignored me and followed the same path.

You know what's worse than having to fight zombies? Being ignored by the damn things. It makes you wonder if you are even there. I suspect that if I wandered near them, they would probably attack me (which I'm not going to test), but the way they just carried on, ignorant of my existence, made me wonder if they sense much at all. Maybe they can't even see you unless you are right on them.

It's starting to grate on me. The need to know where the hell they are all going. I know that I'm going to be daft enough at some point to follow them and find out, but right now I'm down to two cans of drink. I'm surprised that I've managed to make the remaining few last this long.

I want to go back to the old camp, and disregard the need to head off somewhere that I don't know to find more supplies. Food isn't a problem as there are about a million mushrooms growing in the dark all over the place. Water is a problem, though.

Ok, I'm heading out now. Got my satchel and a few bits and pieces. Got the tools, the mace, lighter, a couple of empty bottles (one of which looks remarkably like that bottle I gave the old man on the bus), a few torches, and one of the lanterns.

I decided to go for the bike and pram pile, to see if I can put together some form of trolley to move stuff in. It's right on the edge of an area I haven't been far into, with plenty of mushrooms, so I can explore a little and grab some food at the same time.

Oh, and it's not near the zombie route.

## **Day 14**

Yesterday I spent the majority of the day rummaging through the pile of prams and bicycles trying to find enough useful bits to put something together. I did it in the end, after a lot of messing about. I found an old pram that only had three wheels, and a single wheel that was roughly the same size. It's probably going to wobble though.

Thinking of other possibilities, I also picked up a couple of the bikes, and various other parts that looked usable, and pushed them along in the pram, back to the bus.

After a couple of trips there, I had enough bits to rig something up, and spent the rest of the day inside the bus, fixing up my new contraption. I made it from two prams, four bikes, and a heap of other bits to keep it from falling apart. A push cart.

It is a thing of engineering genius and beauty.

Well, it is to me.

There is only one can of drink left. I've done well to ration them, but they don't exactly quench any thirst. If anything, they make it worse.

Today I decided to go and have a poke around back near the old camp. There was an area where all the cardboard was damp, so I figured there had to be water near there, somewhere. I took a pile of empty bottles and one of the hanging lanterns. Hopefully I'd find something to fill the bottles.

On the way to the wreck, I spotted the hose pipe that I had seen before. It had a few holes in it, and was wrapped round a massive stone block that looked like a collapsed part of an old building. It took a bit of cutting with the new knife to free a section of it about four metres long. I cut it into two pieces, which should be enough for siphoning off petrol, I thought. I've seen how it's done; my dad was always tinkering with his car, but I've never tried to empty a petrol tank myself before.

The zombies had gone, and there wasn't even much left of the gargantuan one with the swinging head for a weapon; the one that I torched. There were small bits here and there, but the majority had vanished. I'm sure some of the bits were broken bone. Maybe DogThing came back and had his dinner here.

After clearing out what remained of my camp, including the pillow, sofa foam, curtains, and odd bits that I had collected, such as the pile of chair legs, I wandered back over to the car wreck.

It was still there, with that musty smell of petrol lingering in the air. Where I had managed to prise open the side of the vehicle, the petrol tank was in clear view. I admit that I was a little nervous holding a lighted torch over it.

After propping the torch up a few feet away, I took off the petrol cap and forced the pipe down the hole. It took a lot of sucking to get the petrol flowing out, and it tasted disgusting, but soon I had a few full bottles.

The lantern, once filled, lit up an area much bigger than the torches did. At last a source of light that shouldn't run out every half an hour. I hoped.

It was strange to see the old camp area, and the place where I first arrived, all brightly lit up. I could clearly see a hundred yards or more before the bright light began to recede.

After a bit of clambering about, I found a decent piece of metal pole and attached it to the pram with ripped bits of curtain, pointing upwards. A couple of whacks from my mace and there was a hook shape on the top to tie the lantern on. Another strip of the curtain sorted that out.

The damp area where I first found the cardboard, a few feet from the spot where I first woke up, was as dry as the rest now, and I couldn't find a reason for it being wet in the first place.



Something I hadn't noticed while I was living out of that camp was a mountain of books and newspapers about a hundred yards along the wall, in the opposite direction from where I made my quick exit a few days ago. I pushed the cart over to it and had a rummage in the pile.

There had to be thousands, maybe tens of thousands of books and magazines in the pile. I grabbed a few of the least damaged ones and stacked them on the cart before moving on, promising myself that I had to come back and have a proper look. If I was going to be stuck here, I may as well have something to read.

It was so much easier to spot useful things with the area lit up almost as bright as daylight, but that also meant I kept seeing stuff that would definitely come in handy. Far too much of it to carry at that moment. Damn it. I was becoming a bag lady.

One interesting thing that I did spot was half a dozen sacks filled with empty drink cans, the same ones that I had been living off. Unfortunately, there weren't any left unopened. Had someone else sat here drinking them all?

DogThing hasn't shown his face again since he popped back to the bus yesterday. I wish that I knew what he knew. He's probably lying in a huge pool of water somewhere, drinking his fill and frolicking on the shore. If only he could talk. I bet there would be an endless amount of interesting things he could tell me, having lived here all his life. I still wonder what exactly he is, and how he got here.

As I headed out to the mushroom field, I spotted the oddest thing.

Scaffolding.

I don't mean piles of it. This stuff was already erected and sitting there in the middle of an immense clearing in the junkyard that was close to the wall. Some of it was hanging down, ready to collapse, but most of it was standing quite sturdy, ramps, ladders and all. The only thing that was missing was the building in the midst of it all. There wasn't time to head over to it and investigate; I needed new supplies. I set off again, pushing my cart back towards the mushroom field.

Sometimes it just doesn't click does it?

Then later on you have an epiphany, and feel damn stupid because you didn't put two things together.

Mushrooms.

Where do they grow?

In the dark. With little light. In the damp.

I was busy cutting up my third mushroom, standing in what looked like an endless field of the things. They stretched on as far as I could see, so I wasn't going out into them. I'd have gotten myself lost.

Then I felt something tap me on the shoulder.

I spun round, dropping both the mushroom and my knife. My heart almost leapt out of my throat. That stunned tingling feeling you get when you jar an elbow, or knee on something, shot through my whole body.

There was nothing there, only more mushrooms and darkness.

I was alone.

The mace was in my hand in about a millisecond, well, maybe not that quick, but I was fast. It was a good job that I wasn't holding the lantern or I might have dropped it and wound up standing in complete darkness. A minute went by and then I felt it again, but this time it was on the top of my head.

A drip.

In the utter silence of this never-ending void, I heard a sound that nearly made me jump up and down with joy. It was only a faint noise, barely audible, but it was there.

The pattering sound of rainfall.

## **Day 15**

Catching rainwater is not an easy thing to do.

I spent the remainder of day 14 hunting down bits of plastic and sheets of anything that I might be able to use to catch the water in. Eventually I dug some holes in the sparse layer of soil that is like a crumbly coating on the rock floor. I straightened out what little bits of plastic sheeting I could find in the nearby rubbish, making small reservoirs. Then I waited for the water to collect.

An hour later and I managed to fill one bottle of water up, which I drank down in about three seconds.

It was fantastic. But there wasn't enough of it.

After some more hunting, and more digging, I eventually managed to cover a large area of ground with little potholes for the water to collect in. I'd have to come back after I'd slept and hope that it had worked.

I had another strange dream last night.

I was still on the bus, sitting watching the traffic and the throng of people on the streets of London, but this time I was the only one on the bus. I didn't look downstairs at the driver's booth, mainly because I had an eerie feeling that it would be empty.

The journey seemed to last for ages, but then I guess it would if you were sitting there with no destination. I had no idea where I was going or where I was supposed to be getting off. So I sat there. Then I fell asleep, within the dream, which was odd.

In the dream within the dream, I was watching the old tramp again, but this time he wasn't in London, not even on the bus. He was here, walking among my mushroom patch, past all of the (now full!) little water pits I had built.

He didn't seem aware of them though. He appeared preoccupied with something else, something that I wasn't privy too. He was wandering slowly through the mushrooms. Although it might sound strange, I think that he was singing to them. He held his arms outwards and his palms flat. A mumbling sound, like a hum of an electricity generator, was coming from his throat.

He walked on, and I was trapped in my camera view of his journey through the mushroom field, which ended after about a half-mile later, after passing some particularly huge mushrooms that must have been ten feet tall.

Along the way, I noticed wooden shafts jutting out of the ground, with pieces of bright cloth tied to the top. The tramp seemed to be using them as a guide through the mushrooms.

After the mushrooms ended, the ground was hard rock. No crumbly soil coated the flat plane of ground that he walked over. I couldn't take my eyes off him. My gaze was fixed on his back. I tried to look around me, but my head wouldn't turn. I was only allowed to look in the direction that he was facing.

The expanse of flat rock went on for the best part of a mile before the ground once again turned to soil. I suspect it was much further, but that was the distance that my brain registered.

Now the land sloped downwards, and for the first time, my vision was released. I realised then that I hadn't been seeing by the light of a torch. I wasn't even there to be carrying one. I was floating, disembodied behind the tramp, and he wasn't carrying any form of light source. Instead, the area was lit by the glow that now came from the scene in front of me.

Where the flat rock plane ended, a valley spread out below us. Wild slopes covered in strange glowing grass and even stranger plants spread out before me.

It was hard to judge the distance to the far side, where the rocks were sharp and jutting upwards into what appeared to be a rock face. It looked like a natural rock wall, rising for hundreds of feet from the valley floor, and lit up by massive stalactites that were formed from a strange, blue, translucent, glowing, glass-like material.

There was a waterfall cascading down into the valley, and white foam splashed off the rocks as the water fell from the darkness above, to end in a roaring swirl in the middle of a crystal-clear lake.

It was beautiful.

My gaze went back to the old man, as he made his way down to the water. I noticed for the first time that a body lay barely five feet from the water's edge.

I followed him down the slope and glanced down at the body. It was him, or what was left of him. Something terrible had happened to him here. Apart from his face, which had enough features remaining to make him recognisable, the rest of his body had been torn apart and spread out across the area in a frantic and random pattern. I guessed that something had literally ripped him apart.

I turned to the other old man, the same, but living one, to find him looking back at me. His eyes were brimming with tears. He spoke, and his words were the last part of the dream that I remember before I woke up.

"Wake up."

I had to find out. I had to go there. It was probably quite a journey. I don't remember the exact passage of time from the dream, but it didn't matter. I had to find the valley. I didn't remember looking at it during the dream, but when I went over it in my head, I was positive that there was a building, a shack of some sort, up on the rocks on the opposite side of the water. There was a wagon, a log pile, and other vague features that I had forgotten, or were blurred, as many things are in dreams. Someone lived there. I don't know if it was the old man, but if the place still existed, I was going to find out.

But not without being prepared first.

I spent the whole of the day getting my supplies together, packing whatever I thought that I would need into my cart. I hauled out the sack of bottles and made

some alterations to it so that it would hang comfortably off the front of the cart. I collected more wood, and made more torches until I ran out of the curtain material. By the time I was finished there was a pile of torches enough to last me a few days if the lanterns ran out.

A trip out to the mushroom patch later on rewarded me with a dozen full bottles of water. I drank two of them down straight away, relishing the feel of real water running down my throat. No more cheap cola for me.

I'd kept a lookout while walking there, hoping to spot more plastic sheeting or anything that might collect water. Nothing jumped out at me.

After chopping up another mushroom to take back with me, and checking that all my makeshift water collectors were set up properly, I turned to head back, but couldn't help but stop and look out over the expanse. Somewhere through those mushrooms I would hopefully find some that were ten feet tall. If I did, I would know that there was a chance that everything else I had seen in the dream was true.

As I go to sleep tonight, I am full of the first hope that I have had. There is a place out there. I'm certain of it. It's a place that has light, and water, and grass. There was grass!

Of course, in the back of my mind I remember the body on the shore, torn to pieces. It somehow didn't worry me. I was under constant threat wherever I was in this place.

## **Day 16**

I didn't sleep as well as I would have liked to last night, but then I wasn't expecting to. I lay awake for a long time last night, wondering whether I should set off right then. Eventually tiredness took me into slumber, and yet another dream.

This time I was sitting on the bank of the lake and the old tramp was sitting next to me, staring into the mirror-like surface of clear water.

"I told you that you would be fine here, didn't I?" His voice was harsh and cracked. His gaze cast out over the lake to something that I couldn't see. "You will be fine here."

"Where is here?" It was all that I could think of among the multitude of questions that I really wanted to ask.

"I wish I knew, exactly. I have been here a long time, as long as I can remember. My life back in the old world seems to be a vague memory, and one that fades a little more each day. Home, is all I can say. This place is my home, was my home."

"What happened to you? Was that you on the lakeside?"

"Yes, again, I wish I knew."

"But you are still here?"

"Yes. It would seem that even in death, I am still trapped here, though that is a comforting thing. After so long here I would not choose to leave. It is a dangerous place. But if you can adapt, as you have done, it is also a wonderful place."

"Dangerous? Like the zombies and the dogs?"

"Yes, and far worse. The zombies, as you call them, are only dangerous if you approach them. They are tormented enough with their own inner pain that they do not wish to be reminded of how whole you still are. The dogs, the Maw, are no danger to you. If anything, they are a gift. Do not fear them."

"But something killed you."

"Yes. There are...other things here. Things best avoided."

"What things?"

I didn't get an answer. Instead, I felt myself drifting away from the scene. My body was no longer a barrier to hold me. My mind raced back to the bus where I lay sleeping. A million questions still unanswered.

Before I awoke, I heard his voice one more time.

"You must find your way here, James. Find your path to the lake. You must leave, soon. For after the rain will come the storm. Leave as soon as you can. I will be waiting for you."

The first on my list of things to do was to head back to the old camp, to the car wreck, to siphon off as much of the petrol as I could in the couple of hours that I had spared myself. I figured that I might not have the opportunity to come back here, at least not without a long trip, and the petrol was something that I didn't want to run out of soon. Torches were all very well, but there was nothing like the light of the lanterns.

The trip was surprisingly quick, with not a single sign of a zombie anywhere. It was disconcerting to be wandering the place, to find nothing. I was on edge the whole way, expecting to hear that stomach-turning groan in the darkness. No movement. Not even DogThing, whom I am starting to miss.

Ten bottles of petrol filled later, and the tank was empty. I had made such a lot of ground in a short time that I wandered back via the book pile, and had a bit of a rummage through it. Most of it was damp from the rain, and mouldy from sitting outside. But I found a few readable books and magazines. A lot of it is ancient.

Then back to the bus, to take as much as I could carry in the cart. Tools, lanterns, mushrooms, the hose, everything that I thought would be useful that would fit on it. By the time I had stacked everything up, the cart was quite heavy. I only hoped the wheels would hold out for the journey.

With some reluctance, I finally set off, saying goodbye to the bus as it disappeared from view. With my temporary home left behind me, I turned the cart toward the mushroom patch, and the journey that awaited me. I had only gone a hundred yards when I saw movement in the gloom ahead.

I prepared myself, mace in one hand and knife in the other, and I watched and waited. The shape moved slowly out into the light, becoming DogThing. He padded towards me, and then sat down about twenty feet away, glancing backwards in the direction that my journey would lead me.

"So you are called a Maw then?" I don't know what I expected back from him, but he replied in his own manner. He shuffled, stood up, and gave me what was almost a nod. Then he made a quiet, whining noise, before sitting back on his haunches.

I hauled the cart into movement again. It was heavy to get started, but once you had momentum it moved quite easily over the dirt ground.

As I got closer to DogThing, he stood up and skirted round me, keeping his distance for a moment before he began to trot alongside me.

"You're coming with me then?"

A snort was my answer.

It seemed he was.

He was still an odd thing to have around, but remembering the old tramp's words, and the times that DogThing had already helped me, saved my life even, gave me a boost of confidence that I had been missing since he disappeared a few days ago. Any companion was good in this place, especially one with the killing ability of a demon mutt.

We set off across the junkyard, heading slowly past the massive piles of refuse that I wished I had had time to sort through a bit more. I was convinced that there was endless useful stuff in there.

Eventually the mushroom patch was in sight, and it felt a little strange to be pushing the cart through it, towards my water reservoirs, with the thought that I might not be coming back this way again, at least not for a while.

The first sign that the dream was living up to its promises was the pools of water that had gathered in my pothole reservoirs. All of them were full, and it took me a while to fill all the bottles that I had stored in the sack, making the cart even heavier to push. By the time I had filled them up, collected the plastic sheets, and begun my journey again, I was starting to feel the tiredness come over me. The later part of the day had gone by much quicker, and although I had no way to judge the time, it certainly felt like I had been awake for a full day.

I pushed on further, and into the mushrooms, struggling with the extra weight of water that I was now carrying. I hadn't travelled more than a few hundred yards or so when I spotted the first marker. It was the same wooden pole that I remembered the tramp following, and had the same bright cloth tied neatly at the top.

As I sit here writing this journal and eating some of what I had already cooked yesterday, shaded from the rain by a massive mushroom (one that is ten feet tall, like I had seen in the dream), and an hour on from finding the first marker, and ten more markers passed, I am hopeful for the future.

DogThing is sitting barely ten feet away from me, also eating, though his is raw and bitten straight from the mushroom. His presence is a constant reminder of how strange this place is, but also how not everything is against me.

I think of the lake, and the shack up on the rocks, and I know there is somewhere to go at last. It's a place not far from here, and though it is no longer inhabited by the living, it is a place that could be lived in, for now. It's a place where an old tramp who I once met on a bus, when I was a child, once lived.

One that talks to me in my dreams.

## **Day 17**

"So who was he then?"

"He was a professor, taught art literature I think, but he was quite mad when I met him down here. He was a nice fellow, harmless enough, but he used to gibber on in some strange language, and he talked to himself a lot."

"And he just disappeared?"

"Yes...well...no, not literally. One day he was talking about needing to go and get food. I said that we had enough mushrooms and pods to last us for months, but he didn't want pods or mushrooms."

"Pods?"

"They grow by the lake. You will see when you get here. They taste like potatoes, but with a sharper taste maybe, and are much bigger. They are slow-growing though."

"I see. Anyway. About Professor Adler?"

"Yes...oh...yes. Well he packed up some provisions, got on his bicycle and headed out across the swamps. He used to travel round a lot before, but this was different, somehow more final. I begged him not to go, but he didn't listen. He never came back."

"Swamp?"

"It's a few miles past the valley. There are some ruins, as well. A city, once, I think. It's a dangerous place. I'll tell you all about it when you get here."

"What's your name anyway?"

"Rudy."

It was strange waking up outside again. The rain hadn't stopped. It still floated down in a barely perceptible sheet, the kind of rain that soaks everything, while giving you the impression that it's just a light shower. I was glad of the huge mushroom that I was sitting under. The ground near the base was almost dry. A few feet away, and the ground was sludge.

DogThing had found himself a similar nook to hide away in, tucking himself under a smaller mushroom about twenty feet away. He was so well camouflaged in this strange field that I almost didn't spot him.

I decided that it was pointless waiting until the rain eased. It hadn't done since it first started drizzling. I spent a few minutes gathering my things, and pushed off out into the wet, trying to spot the next marker.

It was a slow trek through the rest of the mushrooms and up onto the rock plateau. I didn't remember the slope out of the mushroom field being quite so steep in the dream, and it took me about an hour to haul my cart up the few hundred feet of rock.

When I finally got up there, it was the weirdest sight. Talk about flat. The plateau could have been carved by a machine from the bare rock. There was almost a polished sheen, glimmering in the lantern light, stretching out for the few hundred yards of visibility.

DogThing seemed reluctant to follow me out onto the flat at first. He perched on a small outcropping of rock at the top of the slope, and watched me, eventually leaving the safety of his camouflage to catch me up. I'm glad he did. Seeing him sitting there,

watching me go, gave me an eerie lack of confidence in my choice. If he wasn't willing to walk there, what was I doing?

The markers were less frequent across the rock, and each time they were sticking out of a plastic bag filled with small stones, and bits of junk. The hard surface of the ground looked like marble, but less smooth. Of course, I'd only ever seen marble on the floor of banks and museums, where it was highly polished. This must have been marble in its raw state. I could have been walking over a natural resource worth a fortune. One thing I did notice was the long streaks of reddish gold. I thought that they looked like metal of some kind, but I could have been wrong. What the hell did I know about rocks?

DogThing stayed a lot closer to me than usual, snuffling along the ground a few feet behind me, and hugging the shadows that the lantern cast. He seemed ok, but a little uncomfortable.

I reckon it took roughly eight hours to reach the crevasse, and I was about four hours into the journey when the rain stopped. No warning. No light rain, or gradual lapse. It just switched off, like someone had turned the tap off. Twenty minutes later and I was walking on dry ground. I had no idea where the water had all gone.

The crevasse appeared in the gloom, stretching across the path that the markers had led me along. I had a horrible gut feeling as I approached that it was going to be impassable. It appeared to be about thirty feet wide, and dark. When I finally had the chance to look down into it, I sighed with relief. It was only deep as a man's height. Of course, there was no easy way to cross it, and no gradual slope, just a sheer drop.

Well it's another hour or so later as I sit writing this. I've got a little campfire going down in the crevasse, only a small one to cook up some mushrooms. It took me most of that time to haul my stuff out of the cart, and down into the bottom. Then I had to lug the cart down as well.

At first, I left the cart and walked a little way along the edge, hoping that it would end soon, so that I might be able to navigate round it, but there wasn't any sign of an easier crossing, so I gave up. I could have spent hours walking along it to find nothing.

My stomach is still feeling crap after two weeks or so of drinking only cheap fizzy pop. I'm hoping that drinking water will make a difference, clean my system out a bit. Having solid food seems to be helping a lot.

Now that the rain has stopped I'm wishing that I'd laid out more plastic water traps on the way. At least I still have quite a good supply of water bottles.

## **Day 18**

"How far is it?"

"Not far, maybe a day or so from the crack in the plateau. You're making good time."

"Ok."

"The rains have stopped haven't they?"

"Yes."

"The Maw is still with you?"

"DogThing?"



"You named him?" (Laughter) "Yes. Him."

"Yes he is still with me."

"Good. Pay attention to his senses. The gargants don't usually move up onto the plateau, so you should be ok."

"Gargants? What the hell are they?"

"Huge things. Vicious. They come from the swamps after the rain. If the ground starts shaking then you run in the opposite direction and hide, fast. But don't worry. You'll be ok on the plateau."

"No zombies?"

"No, no zombies. They seem to frequent the junkyards and the ruins, cutting a path straight through the swamp to make their way to the great wall that you found up there. Though they take the long way round the plateau for some reason. I've never seen one up near the waterfall."

"Are they really zombies? Those things?"

"No. Not really."

DogThing was even more on edge for most of the day. I pressed on for as many hours as I could, leaving little time to write this by the time I set up camp again. Honestly, it's all just flat rock, so not much to report anyway.

Endless, flat rock.

## **Day 19**

"It was nervous?"

"Yes. He stuck close to me, by the cart, for a few hours, and he kept watching the darkness and stooping low. He wasn't a happy dog."

"No ground tremors?"

"No."

"Good. Keep going. You'll reach the valley soon."

"I'll be glad to get there."

(Laughter)

"I bet. Be careful when you get here though. On rare occasions, a gargant wanders up from the lakes and drinks from the waterfall pool."

"Lakes?"

(Laughter again)

"Yes. Lakes."

He was right about arriving soon. Later that day, after hours of pushing the cart, the edge of the plateau dropped off out of sight. DogThing reacted before I even saw the terrain change. He bolted towards the darkness and almost disappeared before the flat rock gave way to a grassy slope.

I had seen the points of blue light for a while in the distance, but until we got closer I couldn't make out what they were. I'd suspected correctly, though. It was the crystal stalactites from my dreams, and as I approached the edge of the valley, my eyes

adjusted to the new light. The vastness of it all was overwhelming. The valley spread for what seemed like miles. The sound of the waterfall cascading down the rocks was quiet and muffled. Sound doesn't seem to travel as well as light does in this place. It's also odd how the light seems to deaden off at a distance. Only the blue light of the crystals travels far. The darkness is almost like a fog.

I found Rudy's body down by the water's edge. It was exactly where it had been in the dream, but it wasn't the same. Where before there had been skin and bits of body and blood all over the place, now there were only dry, old bones, most of which had become submerged in the mud.

He hadn't died recently.

The old shack was there, up on the rocks, not far from the waterfall. It was quite a trek up the path, which I think must have been worn away by water rather than been cut. The rock was too smooth.

Rudy was waiting at the entrance to the building, near where the door was flung open and hanging half off its hinges. A strange, warm wind was gusting across the rock as I hauled the cart up the slope.

After everything I had seen in this dark world, even with the zombies (apparently not zombies), and DogThing, and the mushrooms, seeing a floating, glowing ghost of a dead man was still quite disturbing. I was wary as I approached, but he was smiling and beckoning me forward.

"You made it. Good. Come on, quickly. Get inside before the gargant smells you." He pointed behind me, beyond the waterfall.

I turned round, looking down the valley, and saw the creature he spoke of. The gargant was close by, and the name was quite apt. I'm not sure what it was that I was expecting to see, but I know that a giant slug thing wasn't it. From my best judgement, given the distance, it was easily the size of the bus, maybe larger. It shuffled on a multitude of tiny legs that lined the bottom of its body, and hundreds of tentacles writhing across the ground in front of it, as it scoured the river bed and the grass near the lake's edge for, well, whatever it was looking for.

"Mad."

"Yes. Exactly. Nasty things. Fortunately they can't get all the way up here. The rocks don't give them enough purchase to climb, but they can get part of the way up, and have wrecked the lower end of the valley before, killing all the pods that grow there. Come inside. Let's not give it any reason to come any further upstream."

I left the cart on the flat, rocky area in front of the shack and went in, following my ghostly friend. I noticed that DogThing had disappeared again, and Rudy must have sensed my thoughts.

"Don't worry, it will be back. The Maw seem to love gargant spawn, and they are far too quick for the gargants to catch."

My stomach churned.

"Gargant spawn?"

"Eggs. They leave piles of them in the mud, easy for Maw to dig up. Best not to think about it."

The shack looked long abandoned, but the rough stone fireplace, the only part of the building not made of wood, was stocked up and ready to be lit.

"I made the fire before I went down to the lake that last time. It's been sitting there...ready...for years."

It took a while to get the fire going. Some of it was damp and mouldy, but after removing the worst of it, the fire took well. Soon the shack was lit up and warm.

Rudy showed me round, commenting on many of the things in his house. There were only three rooms. The main living room, a small bedroom, and a storage cupboard at the back that stank of rotten food. It would take some cleaning up, but with a little work the place could be liveable again.

In the main living room there was an old sofa, a small desk pushed in one corner, and a bookshelf crammed full of old books and papers.

"The Professor's diary is in there, on the top. I read it a while after he left. I felt guilty, but I wanted to know what he was thinking. You may want to read it. It's...strange...but it explains a little about why he was mad I think. The bits from when he was in London weren't that interesting, but the few entries he made when he moved to the country, are."

I nodded, moving on to look at the large grandfather clock stood in one corner, motionless. The time was stuck at half past four. Dust caked the top and the glass, and the wood was dry and cracked. It was still a beautiful thing, though.

"It stopped working a while after I died." His voice was quiet. "It needs winding up every week or so. The chimes don't work, but the tick of the clock is nice."

He was silent for a moment. "It could do with cleaning up a little. I never got round to restoring it properly, didn't have anything to clean it with. Would you mind winding it up? It's the turnkey at the back."

I did as he asked, and started the pendulum swinging. Soon the quiet tick, tick of the clock broke the silence.

"I used to sit in here a lot, reading. Adler liked to walk a lot, but I preferred to stay in here. The sound of that clock was quite relaxing."

"The professor didn't stay here much?"

"Yes, he did, most evenings anyway. He spent most of the day wandering, and he slept outside. Up the slope, behind the shack a short way, is an overhang in the rock. He had a camp there. There's not much there now though. I brought most of it back down here, after he left."

"I see. I'll have a look up there later, after I've got my stuff in here."

Searching through the bookshelf, I could see it held mostly classic old tales and several copies of the same thesis book by the professor; duplicates of the books I found in the bus.

"There is a mountain of books of all kinds, mostly rotten, over in the junkyard. You've probably seen it. I used to pick some up whenever I went back there, hunting for stuff." He pointed at the bookshelf. "That's where most of this came from."

Later that day I did read the professor's diary, at least the last few entries that he had written before he arrived in this place. I decided to put the pages inside my

journal, in case they become useful at some point.

### **Professor Adler's Diary**

Below are the last entries in the diary of Professor John Adler of Temperance, Northamptonshire, before his arrival in this other place.

#### **March 20th, 1922**

It is the first day of spring, and it is a time of the year I always love. The snow, which back when I was boy would still be melting even now, is long gone. I think the weather must be changing over the years.

As I walk the lanes of the country, which I love to do in the afternoons now the weather is turning finer; I see all the first signs of the year to come. The flowers are beginning to bloom, small animals are flitting about, collecting food or materials to build their little nests with, and there's that crisp, pungent smell in the air.

It is nice at least, that the weather has turned, so that I may take a break from writing my memoirs. They are a joy that I would not set aside for long, but it is, as I heard some of the younger, modern thinking artists say, at my last seminar, 'nice to get out'.

It occurred to me today, while I was passing one of the paths that jut off the lane that I walk, which winds round the lake, that I had never ventured aside from my regular route. There are numerous small pathways that twist and turn away from that thin road, leading to wherever they may go. I was gripped with an urge, one which I must say I resisted for the moment, to start this year's walking with something daring. I was infused with the thought of venturing somewhere new. I must consider this during my evening musings.

#### **March 21st**

There are swans on the lake today, glorious and majestic creatures they are. I was gifted with the most wondrous treat when I bore witness to two of the mightier specimens furiously debating the right to the attentions of one of the females. They were indeed noisy and abrupt, it was most impressive.

During my walk, I fulfilled a little of my intent to venture forth and experience a new journey, when I found a likely and interesting path. I took it upon myself to walk but three hundred full strides along it, before inhaling the view and then returning whence I came, with a promise to venture further the next morning. It was spontaneous, even though the intent was premeditated, I know that sounds strange. I wasn't expecting to find a good candidate. This particular lane was one that I couldn't recall seeing before.

The lane was long and winding into the distant fields, very enticing, and I was suddenly elated, joyous even, what an excellent idea this was. I think it would make a nice walk if I started out early enough. I will do this tomorrow.

#### **March 22nd**

I started out ten full minutes earlier this morning for my walk, following my usual route around the lake, and not stopping for any distraction that might place itself upon me.

When I arrived at the path, I estimated that I would have at least an hour to venture this day. My diary entry will be short to give me extra time.

### **March 23rd**

On my third visit to the path, I have found a wonderful spring running down the slope of a small hill. Because the flask in which I carry my tea was empty, I decided to sample the water from the stream, it is quite an unusual find, and the water is exceptionally clear. I tried it in my tea, in the evening, and it has a wonderful mineral tang to it, quite unlike anything I have tasted before. I must return for another sample tomorrow.

### **March 24th**

I have made an interesting discovery along the lane this day. About a quarter of a mile along, which is indeed a long walk, there is the most exquisite chapel. It resides on the side of the hill, a short walk along one of the paths that leads off this new road that I am walking each day. Behind the chapel, which seemed quite deserted and unused, is a small graveyard with some amazingly old gravestones. I only managed to investigate a few of them, and there are at least three dozen other. The dates that I saw were 1722 and 1728, so extremely old, and intriguing.

I have decided this evening that I will, just for the day, postpone my memoirs and make a whole day of it. I have made sandwiches and selected two ripe apples, and found my old walking satchel to take with me. I think it will be an interesting day.

Once more this morning I filled a flask with water from the spring for my tea this evening. It adds a wonderfully sharp taste to the tea that is both subtle and lasting.

### **March 25th**

I had the most interesting experience this day, while sitting on the bench in the graveyard. One moment the day was clear, with barely a cloud in the sky, then the next moment the sky changed. It seemed as though it happened in an instant. Above me were dark thunderheads, and a chill wind blew across the hills. I'm not sure if it was something that I am coming down with, but my vision felt blurred for a moment, and shadows inside the chapel and the stones shifted slightly, giving me a slight dizzying feeling. I rubbed my eyes, and looked back up, and everything was as it should be once more, the sky was clear and the sun was smiling down upon the hills again. I thought that it was strange for the weather to change so quickly.

I am unable to explain what caused this strange vision, if that is what it was. I am certain that it was merely a moment of sickness on my part.

I have taken to using the water from the spring in my lemon drink before I retire to my bed, as well as my lunch and evening tea. I have found that I feel much more invigorated in the morning when I awaken, because of this.

### **March 26th**

The oddest thing happened during the night. I had what I can honestly say was a lucid dream, it must be the purifying effects of the water, I am sure of it. In the dream I was up at the graveyard on the hill, and talking to a fellow that I couldn't see clearly. I am not sure of all the conversation; my memory of it is fading, even as write this diary entry.

I do remember the fellow trying to convince me that there was a better way to lead my life, a purer way; it was almost as if he was like one of those door to door peddlers I used to tire of when I lived in the city, thank heavens I moved to the country.

I remember one other thing about the man in the graveyard, he had a terrible smell about him, and I think maybe he hadn't washed for a long time.

I woke with terrible headache, so am going to give my walk a miss today. It looks terribly dreary and dark outside. The weather has taken a turn for the worse, I would guess.

### **March 27th**

Some strange things are happening. The weather changes from a bright sunny day to a misty, stormy half-light. It does this now, regularly, and far too quickly. I worry about what may be causing this terrible change, and what we may have done to our world.

Last night as I lay in my bed, I swore I heard noises outside, someone in great pain, but when I shone my lantern out of the window there was no one there, not even a sign of any passage.

The blurred vision has returned once more, but this time with a vengeance. The strangest thing is that I believe that it may be weather-dependant. When it is sunny outside my vision is as normal, but then when one of the sudden weather changes occurs many things seem blurred. As before this is accompanied by headaches and dizziness for a moment before it passes.

### **March 28th**

I had another dream last night. In this one the very same fellow I spoke to in the graveyard came to my home, and was sitting in the study talking to me. I remember asking him to leave and he said the strangest thing, he insisted that he lived here.

Of course, I scoffed at this, and I told him that he was being ridiculous, but he insisted that I was the intruder. The dream took a strange turn before I awoke, I finally got to see who I was talking to, and it was me, except this version of me was not well, not well at all. It must be a manifestation of my worries about the strange symptoms I am suffering, because this version of me was disfigured, and had what is best described as bits missing. It was quite disgusting. I do hope that this is not some spiritual warning of a fate that may come.

Outside, everything is gloomy and cloudy for most of the day. I did take a walk up to the spring to replenish my supply. I think if it were not for the spring water I would feel much worse.

### **March 29th**

I am determined that I will make an appointment with the doctor. My vision is playing up terribly. This afternoon while the weather was furious outside, I began hearing the most terrible noises, it must be a deficiency of some kind, for the dizziness came, and my vision went blurry, then I heard the screaming. It was a terrible, terrible haunted scream, one of pure torture, and obviously it was completely in my imagination. I ate cheese this morning with my toast, so maybe that has affected me.

I wanted to write it in my diary immediately, but I couldn't for the life of me find the damn thing. And then the oddest thing happened. The sun came out once more, and there it was, my diary and pen, right where they always were. I must have missed them completely during the feverous moment that had now passed.

### **March 30th**

The storm last night was ferocious. The episode with my diary occurred yet again today, I am beginning to question my sanity. It was missing for most of the day while the bad weather and those terrible voices assaulted my senses.

I shall walk down to the village in the morning and see Doctor Elsdon. This can be tolerated no more.

### **March 31st**

Terrible storms. Diary is only there for moments. Dizziness gone somehow. Can't sleep but tired. Strange smell, can't rid of.

### **April or May**

No clue of date, is still April? Legs ache, finger has fallen off, can't understand. Must find food. Cannot leave, terrible hungry, what is date? Chanting heard Nua'lath, Nua'lath. What is this mean?

### **When**

Blood Lots it Everywhere blood Carnt seep the screamun too many screamun

### **Mas 145 1728812**

Nua'lath muo'lah vor : Blud far Nua'lath : Kiy e Nua'lath : Blud far Nua'lath : dun dring der warta

That's the last entry in his diary.

I don't know if it answers any of my questions or not. Did I end up here in a similar way? I wish I could remember what happened after I went to the toilet in the service station.

One thing that worries me is the date. 1922. How long was Adler here?

### **Day 20**

I wasn't aware of falling asleep, though I do know that we talked for hours. I know what woke me though.

The storm had come, just as Rudy had said it would, and I had arrived at the shack in the valley just in time. Outside the shack was a maelstrom of wind, dust, and rain. I'd never seen anything like it. Down the valley hundreds of small tornadoes swirled around, churning up the muck and water. Across the river and up onto the start of the rock plateau I could see rain gushing sideways at an incredible speed.

Odd though. I could still see quite far, at least down into the valley where gargants hunkered down into the muddy water. Several of them were sitting there like massive, wet, rock mounds, half submerged in the swamp.

DogThing wasn't anywhere to be seen. I guessed that he had snuck off somewhere and found a shelter of his own.

The shack was mostly untouched by the storm, tucked away as it was in the hollow of the rock face near the waterfall. The wind and the rain still battered the walls, and I felt a bit wary that it might come crashing down on my head at any moment.

Rudy must have sensed my concern.

"This place has weathered hundreds of storms."

"Ok. Good."

He sat down on the chair near the fireplace. Can ghosts actually sit? It would seem so.

"Whoever built it certainly knew what they were doing. It may look like a pile of junk, but it's solid."

"You didn't build it?"

"No. It was here before I arrived, pretty much as you see it now. I made a few repairs, but not a lot."

I spent most of the rest of the day having a poke around in the house, hunting around for useful stuff. Found more tools, including a rusty saw and a couple of hammers. I also moved my cart into the shack, out of the storm, and emptied it. Some of the scraps of wood I'd gathered stoked up the fire nicely and I was able to dry everything out.

The storm ended during the night. I awoke to silence. I even think it was the silence that woke me.

## **Day 21**

I found a hole.

Not a normal hole. This is a little bit different. Well, the best description I have for it is a hole.

I found it outside the hut after the storm, as I was trudging among the newly formed rock pools. Any crevice or recess in the rock that could hold water was filled up and I was busy bottling as much of it as I could.

I stood frowning at the hole for a few minutes, watching the water trickle out of it and down onto the ground to gather in one of the pools. Even if I empty the pool, it keeps refilling with the water from the hole.

Doesn't sound strange does it? Nope. But this hole is in mid-air. It's not in the rock or the ground. It's about three feet off it. Just...sitting there? Holes don't sit do they? Hanging there even.

Well it's there anyway, and once the water finally stopped coming out of it a beam of bright light lit up the pool. The light was coming out of the hole. Even stranger, it could only be seen from one side. When I walked round to the other side there was nothing, only the light, but from the front I could clearly see a hole.

I went back to the hut and fetched a thin piece of wood, and then went back to the hole and stood gobsmacked as I poked the stick through it. Sure enough it went into the hole and didn't appear on the other side. Fortunately it didn't devour the stick as I pulled it back out again. If it had done that I think I might have run screaming and hidden back in the shack.

"Strange aren't they?"

It was Rudy. He was standing a few feet away.

"What the hell is it?"

He shrugged.



"Well, a hole, I guess. I've never been able to figure out what they are. Only that they appear for a short time after the storms and gradually disappear."

"Weird as hell."

(Laughter)

"Yes. Very much so. Adler used to turn into a nervous mess when those things appeared. He swore that he came here through one of them."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. I'm not calling him a liar, but I've never seen one big enough to fit a man through."

We talked as we walked back up to the shack.

"How did you get here, Rudy?"

He was quiet for what seemed a long time before speaking again.

"I'm not entirely certain, but I know that I had been assaulted. Back in the old world, in the area that I lived, there was a gang of what is best described as rich thugs, high earners in the city, some people said, who had a hobby of going into the slums and making sport on those who could do little to defend themselves. They did some quite awful things. I was quite used to avoiding them usually. They'd turn up every now and then in the middle of the night in their fancy cars. They would grab someone and take them somewhere out of the way and...Well you can imagine the rest. One night I was asleep and didn't hear them coming."

We arrived back at the shack and sat down on the rocks outside. Rudy continued.

"The whole experience is hazy, but I do remember something interrupting them, something terrible. I remember being picked up by people who I couldn't see. They were different people and not the gang. I was stunned or concussed I think. They took me. I woke up in the ruins across the swamp. That's about all I can remember."

"They didn't tell you where you were?"

"They weren't there when I awoke."

"But the zombies? You said they are all over the ruins."

"Yes. They are now. They weren't so much back then. At least I don't remember seeing any. I eventually found this place after being scared out of my wits by the gargants."

Rudy was quiet for most of the evening. I settled into one of the chairs in the shack and read bits of some of the magazines and books.

## **Day 22**

DogThing was back. I didn't spot him immediately. He was sitting on the top of a rock across the river, watching me.

This time he wasn't alone.

I was so pleased at seeing him again that it took me a while to even notice the others. It was only when one of them stood up, stretched, and then sat back down, that I saw them. They were huddled together under a rocky outcropping about half-way up towards the plateau, four of them, watching me.

"You seem to have gathered more followers."

Rudy was standing in the doorway to the shack.

"You think they are safe?"

"Yes. Look there is something I need to tell you about. I'm guessing that you are planning to head out again soon."

I thought about it. It hadn't occurred to me since arriving at the shack but I couldn't stay there for ever. That would never get me home.

"Yes. I have to move on at some point."

"Understood. Well you need to be wary of someone in this place; someone very dangerous."

"More dangerous than gargants and zombies?"

(Laughter)

"Yes. Much more. He is called CutterJack, at least that's how I know him."

"Odd name."

"Yes. You asked about who it was that killed me, and I was wary about voicing my thoughts about it at the time, but I believe it is he who killed me down by the river. I've only ever seen him once and that was a long time ago. I was in the city ruins fighting the zombies there, while scavenging. It was before I met Adler and at the time I was relieved to see someone else, but he came at me brandishing knives, long, sharp ones. The same ones I'd seen him killing zombies with. I ran. But he was too fast, and caught me up, cornering me in one of the ruins, cursing and ranting, spitting at me."

"And he killed you?"

"No, at least not that time. That was our first encounter and it was the Maw that saved me then. They came out of the shadows and chased him off. There were many of them, a dozen even. I haven't seen that many Maw since then."

"Sounds like a nasty piece of work."

"He is. I call him he. I don't know. It may be a creature."

"How did you know its name?"

"Adler. Oddly enough. I mentioned him to the professor once and he sang me a song about a character called CutterJack. I've no idea where the song came from, but the name stuck. Just be wary and hope your Maw sticks with you. I think it was CutterJack that caught me down by the river, when I was alone."

"Oh, I see."

"Well I'd not seen him for years after that. But every now and then when I was wandering, scavenging and stuff, I'd come across a zombie that had been slaughtered. So CutterJack was still around somewhere."

### **New things to note:**

Swamp pods do taste like potatoes, if a bit mustardy.

DogThing and his friends don't like pod.

The other Maw look different to DogThing. Each has its own distinct look. I've named one of them Mo. She has a tuft of hair, a little like a mohawk, running along her

back. It's bright green. Very odd. She has brighter eyes. I don't know if she is a she, but she looks somehow more feminine than the others.

The hole has gone.

### **Day 23**

I'd been hanging around the shack since I arrived. This morning I decided it was time to have a look round nearby, so I grabbed the lantern and my makeshift rucksack. I swapped a few things around and added a few tools and some water bottles, and then headed out, but not down towards the swamp and the gargants. That would have been stupid. Instead I wandered up into the rocks, and the hill behind the shack, hoping to find some trace of Adler's camp.

I could only get a few hundred feet further up the rock, behind the shack, before it became too steep to climb. I was about to give up searching for the outcrop of rock that Rudy had mentioned, the professor's camp, when I noticed the rope hanging down twenty or so feet from me.

It was dangling there, hanging in the darkness. I climbed over the rocks towards it and looked up. In the gloom above I could barely make out what might be the outcrop of rock. It didn't look very big, and there was at least a fifty-foot climb upwards. Without the rope I would never have been able to get that high, not without some seriously hard work. It took me twenty minutes to pull myself up.

There was a cave about thirty feet deep cutting into the rock, ending in loose rubble, and it was there that I found some of the remains of Professor Adler's camp. There wasn't a lot left, just a mattress and a blackened fire pit that was long abandoned. How the hell had Adler got a mattress up here? I had struggled to get up there by myself, and from Rudy's description, Adler had been a lot older than I. I doubt he would have been able to put the rope up there, so it had to be there already. I wish he was still here. So many questions.

Stranger still, was where the rope had been attached. Poking out of the floor was a metal hoop about two inches thick. It was attached to the rock by a heavy metal panel and bolts.

I was about to light up the lantern, to have a look at the back of the cave, when I noticed that there was light coming from somewhere already; somewhere at the back of the cave was a faint glow of a different colour to all the other lighting in this place. Not quite so unnatural. I left the unlit lantern on the ground near the entrance of the cave with my rucksack next to it, and walked cautiously into the darkness until I reached the bottom of the rubble, still unable to see where the light was coming from.

At the top of the rubble I found my answer. The rocks weren't the back of the cave. A small gap about two feet high gave way to darkness. Darkness, except for a single perfect line of light on the ground somewhere below. I couldn't judge the distance.

A few minutes later, and I was back up at the gap with my rucksack over my shoulders and the lantern lit. The light from the lantern revealed what turned out to be a corridor below. I say a corridor because it was definitely not natural. All along the walls hung chunks of cracked plaster. The ground was littered with the stuff, as well as a heap of other junk. Bits of paper, magazines, empty tin cans, another burnt-out campfire and a pile of mattresses. Maybe the mattresses had already been up here?

It took me a few minutes to negotiate my way down the rocks without injuring myself. I put the lantern smack in the middle of the corridor to get as much light on the area as I could. It was about forty feet long, straight into the rock. There was a filing cabinet lying on its side, the drawers pulled out and full of yet more junk. Nothing worth taking though.

The corridor ended abruptly in a flat wall of solid rock. No plaster on this wall, only smooth carved rock. Dead in the middle of the back wall was the source of the light.

A door.

There was no handle, no lock, no hinges or any other visible sign of opening it, only the solid metal door covered in scratches and dents, like someone had tried many times to get through it. At the bottom of the door was a thin crack, no more than a couple of inches high, and light was shining from it. As I said before, this wasn't the same light as any I'd seen in this place so far. It was more natural and startlingly bright. I got to my knees and squinted, trying to make out something through the gap. I was greeted by a fresh, cold breeze. Not damp, not musty or humid.

Fresh air.

I breathed deep and filled my lungs with it as I squinted harder against the glare, still desperate to see what might be on the other side of the door. After a minute or so my eyes adjusted enough to be able to vaguely see. Long days of being in this dark place had changed my vision I guess. Enough that the sunlight, and it had to be sunlight, hurt my eyes.

After more than three weeks in this dark place, I caught a glimpse of somewhere else, somewhere that lay beyond a seemingly unopenable door, a small slice of another place.

I could see grass, and among the grass was a single white flower dancing in the breeze.

## **Day 24**

"You may as well stop now."

It was Rudy, sitting on the filing cabinet, watching me.

I stopped hammering. I'd already broken one of the two hammers I found in the house. I'd even tried prying the rusty saw into the thin gap underneath the door, but there wasn't enough leverage to cut. That knackered, old thing was never going to cut metal anyway. I stood for a moment, peering at him, and then realised he had known about the door all along.

"We tried. Me and Adler. He was more persistent than I, but in the end he gave in as well. It's at least six inches thick, that door. I guess that's what drove him away in the end. I think he went a bit bonkers realising that the only way out of here that we'd found was only a few hundred yards away, and we didn't have the means to open it."

"Why didn't you tell me it was here? It's daylight out there."

"Yes. It is. But daylight where?"

I dropped the hammer and sat down on the hard stone floor, catching my breath.

"What do you mean?"

Rudy shrugged.

"Do you know where we are any more than I do? It's alien enough down here without stepping out into daylight. Is that our world up there?"

"I don't know, but you still could have told me why Adler really made his camp up here."

"Yes, I could have told you, should have maybe. I'm sorry."

"How long was he up here?"

Rudy shrugged again.

"Probably months, I don't know. If I'm honest with you, I didn't discover it. Adler did. I was here at the shack for a long time, years even, before Adler, and I never found the door. I mean it, I'm sorry. I didn't want you to waste the stupid amount of time we did, Adler and I, trying to pry the damn thing open. I was hoping to save you from that."

We sat in silence for a while.

"There's no lock. No door handle. No hinges."

"No. Whoever put it there, put it there to keep what's in here locked away I guess."

"And it's the only way out?"

"Yes, well, as far as I know. I guess that Adler may know by now if there is, that's what he left to find. I certainly haven't found any other way."

"And you never went with him."

It was a statement more than a question.

"No. I don't know why I didn't. If I'm honest, I wish I had. I've wished that so many times since then."

"Why didn't you take off after him?"

"Fear, I guess."

I sat for a while, looking round, at the door, the junk strewn around the place, and Rudy.

"How long have you been here at the shack, Rudy? I mean how long before you died?"

He was quiet for a while.

"I don't know how long since I've been dead. I haven't been able to make the marks on the calendar for so long."

"The calendar?"

He shook his head and sighed.

"Come. Come with me."

I collected my things, including the broken hammer, just in case I could fix it, blew out my lantern, and then we made our way over the rubble and back down the rope. I was surprised to see Rudy still climb down the rope, I don't know if he had to, being a ghost and all, but he still did it.

He took me to the back of the shack and there he showed me something that I hadn't noticed in the couple of days I had been there. I hadn't thought to look behind it.

At the back of the shack was a fifteen-foot gap, before a sheer wall about eight feet high. It spanned the entire length of the shack and was covered with a makeshift lean-to made of corrugated metal and wood, much like the rest of the shack.

"You'll need your lantern, or see if one of the ones in the box over there still works."

I took a quick look in the box near the arched entrance, and took my own lantern out of my pack and lit it.

The light flickered for a moment and then glowed brightly as I turned the gauge to get as much light as possible. Across almost the entire back wall of the lean-to, scratched into the rock, was Rudy's calendar. Row after row of small marks in bunches of six, and then crossed through the middle. Every so often there was a small letter carved between the marks. J, F, M, A, M, J, J, A, S, O, N, D and then a few marks after the D came a number.

Months, and the numbers were years. My heart jumped a little when I saw the last number, with only three scratched marks after it.

31

"You were here for over thirty years?"

"Yes. Thirty-one years, as it says. I don't know how many passed after my death though. It's hard to keep count when you can't make a mark any more, and since I don't sleep, it's just been one long day to me."

"You could still leave though. Leave this place and look for Adler, look for a way out. Nothing could hurt you either."

He shook his head.

"No. Unfortunately it seems I am stuck here, and when you go I will remain here still."

"How do you know that?"

He sat down on a stump of wood that was leaning against the rock wall.

"I've tried. Many, many times I've tried. I get as far as the bottom of the plateau or down to the foot of the hill where the river from the waterfall meets the swamp, where the pods grow, and I can go no further."

I traced my hand across the lines etched into the wall. It was almost like reading Braille. Not that I could read Braille, but it was how I imagined it would be.

Except this calendar had taken him thirty-one years to write.

"How? Why can't you go any further?"

"I don't know. It gets harder to move the further I am away. Then at a certain distance I can no longer move any further forward. It's like being held by a giant leash that won't stretch any further."

"From what? Where's the middle? Have you tried to find out what's stopping you?"

"Yes, I'll show you."

We left the calendar room and I followed him down towards the river, across the small rock bridge, and over to the other side.

"That."

He was pointing at his body.

"It seems that I cannot travel far from the spot where I died, and even worse, I can't see any further than my prison."

"How so?"

He looked up and over towards the swamps.

"What do you see when you look that way?"

I followed his gaze.

"I see the river, and the swamp, the gargants over there, a line of pods on the river bank, and then more swamp."

"Yes, well, I can see where the river ends, but only a few feet of the swamp. I can see up to the cave, but I can no longer see out of the door and into the light. Darkness like a fog is all I see, even when I stand right up close to it."

As Rudy was talking something flashed in the dim light, a glimmer of some kind, shining off something on the ground. I crouched down and reached into the grass. It was metal, a chain or a necklace, but most of it was buried under the soil.

"What have you found?"

"I don't know. A chain of some kind."

I grabbed the nearest thing I could find to dig with, one of my knives, and dug the chain out of the ground. It was a necklace, silver or steel. Dangling from the end of it was a compass.

It seemed that Rudy couldn't contain his joy.

"It's my compass! I thought it was lost!"

I cleaned off the dirt and held it up so I could see it more clearly. As I turned the compass round the hand moved. It still worked, the hand pointed out over the swamp and past the gargants.

"Please. Can I see it?"

I held it up so that Rudy could look. He reached out but his hand passed through it. He looked disappointed.

"Will you keep it for me? Will you bring it to the shack?"

"Of course."

I was tired. Climbing the rope and hammering at that door had worn me out. We settled back into the shack and I got the fire going. As I sat reading aloud some of Professor Adler's earlier memoir entries, Rudy stood gazing at his compass hanging on an old nail jutting out of the wall.

## **Day 25**

It's been a long day and I have a lot to write. Right now I'm hunkered down in what appears to be the cellar of a ruined building. It's dark down here. I've got the lantern turned down as low as possible to conserve the fuel, just bright enough to be able to

write. I can see the faint glow that Rudy emanates coming from the stairway. It's strange to think that so much has changed in a few hours, and I still can't think what it might have been that caused it all.

I'd been asleep, overtired from climbing up into the cave. The noise that woke me made me jump up from my sleeping place near the fire, and my heart was pounding. Rudy was there, peeping out of a small hole in the wall. Outside what could only be described as a war was raging. The screams and groans of the zombies were almost deafening, though not as loud as the growling and the howls from the Maw.

I fumbled around and finally found where my mace lay, grabbed it and ran for the door.

Rudy yelled at me not to go.

"Don't. It's too dangerous."

But I was acting on gut instinct and ignored him. Instead I flung the door open and stepped outside.

Zombies everywhere. Hundreds of them.

Littered across the ground all the way from the river to the house were the torn remains of dozens of the things. The Maw darted backwards and forwards, bringing down zombie after zombie and tearing them to shreds. The zombies seemed strangely oblivious to the demon dogs and were mindlessly intent on getting up the hill to the shack.

I know that I didn't need to join in, but something told me that my new friends were defending me, and I couldn't let them do it alone. I ran down the hill, the mace raised ready, my common sense screaming at me to stop and go back. I charged at the nearest zombie that wasn't being munched on by one of the Maw.

Crunch. Splat. That was the noise as well as I could describe it. I swung the mace, this time not throwing my whole weight into it as I had my first encounter. I'd learned a clumsy lesson that day, and wasn't going to make the same mistake again. The zombie barely saw me coming but I swore there was a brief moment of recognition before I smacked the thing across the side of the head.

I was hoping that I could take one down if I wasn't as clumsy and tried to aim, but I wasn't expecting to end it so quickly. The creature's head exploded, its body lurched sideways with the force of the blow and hit the ground hard.

I didn't have time to rejoice my victory, though; two other zombies were stumbling towards me and I didn't know if it was hunger or hatred in their eyes. One of the zombies only had one eye left, but I swear that eye hated me.

Three swings of my mace later and they were both down. I hadn't hit the first of the pair hard enough and had to draw back, take a step away and swing again. The second fell to my first blow, and with a flash of green fur I saw Mo jump upon it; she dragged it away from me and tore its throat out before I could even judge whether I'd killed it.

I backed further up towards the shack, gave the Maw some space to do what they do best and I waited, taking out any odd zombies that managed to get past them.



Half an hour. That's about how long I think the battle had taken before every zombie was down. I'd killed twenty of them and the Maw had killed countless numbers, possibly hundreds. Some of them still crawled, still tried to carry on, and as I moved around with the Maw, watching them finish off those that hadn't died, a horrible realisation struck me. They hadn't been heading towards the shack at all. They had been trying to get to me.

Somehow I had become a target again. After my flight from my first camp the few zombies that I had seen during my brief stay at the bus had ignored me. Now this was no longer the case. They had come there for me.

Rudy was waiting at the door to the shack, looking worried.

"Are you ok? What will you do now?"

"I don't know."

I sat down, breathing heavily, and watched the Maw as they milled around and prodded at the bodies of the zombies.

"Why do they want me, do you think?"

"I have no idea. I've never known them to bother anyone. They are usually mindless and only focused on wherever it is they are going. I've never had one of them even register that I was there, even when I was not far away."

"Somehow they seem to have noticed me."

"Yes. For some reason, you bother them."

I sat in thought for what seemed a long time. The Maw eventually calmed and wandered back to their rock hollow near the plateau.

"I don't know if I can stay here. Not if they are going to keep coming here. But is anywhere safe from them? Will they follow me wherever I go?"

"I don't know."

We wandered down to the river and a little way to the swamp, but not all the way down. Rudy looked out over the swamp and nodded at the gargants.

"They will notice the bodies of the zombies soon and will come to consume them."

Rudy's expression changed. I was watching him when it happened, and it was like a sudden epiphany (is that the right word?).

"I can see further."

"What?"

He was shaking. (Should ghosts shake?)

"I...I can see further than I could before, across the swamp. I only just realised. I haven't seen across the swamp for years. But I can now."

He looked at me, visibly shocked, then looked out over to the plateau.

"I can't see the plateau or the rope up to the cave. It's all darkness."

He looked as puzzled as I.

He moved quickly across the river and walked towards the rocks below the plateau, then came back.

"I don't understand. Something has changed. The area of my prison has moved about a hundred yards."

I shrugged, unable to help.

"It was centred on my body before, now it seems to have moved to the shack."

We both guessed at the same time.

"The compass."

Rudy laughed.

"All this time. I thought that I was trapped for ever to haunt the spot where I was killed. It wasn't the case at all. The compass."

"That means you can come with me."

"What?"

"You can come with me, when I leave."

That took a moment to sink in.

"Of course, yes, I can can't I?"

"I just have to keep the compass with me. Of course it's up to you."

"I wish to come. Leave this place. I've been stuck here so long that I can't even remember what other places look like any more."

I started back up towards the shack.

"Then it's decided isn't it. We leave."

Rudy caught up with me.

"When? When do we go?"

I could sense the anticipation in him now. He was bursting to get out of here and I was glad. I'd been too safe at the shack, too comfortable. All the water and food I needed and a roof over my head for a few days had made me complacent. I'd been putting off leaving because I was getting used to feeling less lost.

"Now. We go now. It has to be. If we wait then I might start doubting."

We went into the shack and I started gathering as much up as I could.

Rudy hovered around. I could sense he was itching to help me pack, but obviously couldn't.

"Which way will we go?"

"I don't know. I don't want to go backwards. Not back to the bus or the scrap yard. We can't get that door open so that's not an option. Across the swamp maybe?"

Rudy shook his head at this.

"Too dangerous. There are far too many gargants out there and no shelter for miles, but if that's the way you want to go we can go around."

I stopped packing and looked at him.

"Didn't you say that round the swamp was the zombie path?"

"We can go the other way round, up into the rocks on the other side, along from here. It may look sheer but there are numerous paths and some ruined buildings

dotted here and there. At least until we reach the city. It's the way I came here all those years ago."

"Sounds good."

"After that, when we reach the city ruins, we're into new territory though. I don't know the way after that."

"We deal with that when the time comes."

An hour later and we were on our way, and what a strange bunch of travellers we made. I pushed the cart, which was full of everything I'd brought with me so far and a heap of stuff from the shack, everything I thought I could push in the cart that may be useful. Beside me walked Rudy, a ghost. His face beaming with a smile I hadn't seen since I met him. Around us, circling, hopping from rock to rock and sniffing at everything that we passed, were the Maw.

I had wondered if they would follow us, or if it would be only DogThing. When we left it was five Maw, but by the time we got to the ruined building with the cellar, three more had joined us. I don't even remember seeing them arrive; they were just there with the others, scouting ahead of us and watching our backs, constantly guarding.

So here I am, camping down in the cellar, writing this by the faint light of the lantern, before I go to sleep. Rudy has become my watchman. It's strange that he doesn't sleep. I guess ghosts don't need to. He seems quite happy with the idea of sitting there all night, watching out for me.

I heard the Maw moving occasionally, but mostly I think they are huddled together in the ruined building above me.

Before I go to sleep I'm going to tell you about one other thing. Something I found down here in the cellar. It's written on the wall, in charcoal or black chalk, and I didn't notice it until I'd already eaten and set out my bedding.

I turned the lantern up brighter so that I could read it.

It says...

CutterJack, CutterJack,  
He knows where your throat is at,  
Listen out and watch your back,  
Slice you, dice you, little rat.

It's signed underneath. "Adler."

## **Day 26**

"They've gone."

Rudy was sitting at the bottom of the steps when I awoke. It took me a few moments to catch up, clear my head, and realise where I was.

"Who? Gone?"

He nodded towards the stairs leading out of the ruined cellar.

"The Maw."

I sat up pretty quick at that, then stood up, and walked towards the stairs. My body ached again. First night out sleeping rough again I guess. I'd gotten far too used to the mattress in the shack.

"All of them?"

DogThing was still there. He was sitting up on top of one of the broken walls that ringed the building, scratching away happily.

The ruins of the building suggested that it had once been a house of some kind. It reminded me of the walls they dug up in that TV program. What was it called? *Time Team*! I loved that programme. Hippy archaeologists in a hurry.

Rudy was close behind me.

"Only him left. The rest seem to have gone. I didn't even notice them go, and I've been sitting out here all the time you were asleep."

I don't know what it was that I felt. Fear maybe. It wasn't pleasant.

"Strange. I was kind of getting used to them being around."

Rudy laughed. "Yes, me too."

I went back down into the cellar and started packing up my stuff. Most of it was still in my sack and I had left some of it up in the cart. Ten minutes later and we were ready to leave.

Then I realised that I wasn't even sure where I was heading. I hoped that Rudy might have some idea.

"So. Where now?"

"You're asking me? Well apart from that rhyme down in the cellar, we don't have a lot to go on do we?"

"Nope. Not a lot. I guess we head down into the city?"

"Well, it's dangerous down there from what I remember. Zombies, CutterJack and who knows what else."

I climbed up onto one of the rocks downhill from the ruin and sat down on the top. Rudy appeared next to me, though I don't remember him climbing.

From my perch on top of the rock, I could see quite a distance down into the valley, even though it was, as always, dark. The darkness seemed more like a fog and less like pitch black. Dotted throughout the ruins were small clusters of light, though I couldn't make out what it was that the light was coming from. It was enough to get a rough idea of the layout of the buildings and streets. It wasn't as vast as I had imagined it would be. Rudy had called it a city, or was it The City?

"I expected it to be bigger."

"Oh? Well, I guess it's not the size of a city like London or Birmingham. I must admit I don't remember. It was always Adler that called it The City. I suppose he named it that."

"Did he go there much?"

"Yes, quite a lot. He became quite the scavenger and explorer over the years. Most of what we had in the shack was scavenged by Adler from those ruins. I never did get

to ask him how far he actually travelled. He was always up in his camp, or in the shack, before I went to sleep. He said that The City was a gold mine of useful junk."

"He must have travelled fast to get here and back in a day."

"He did have his bicycle."

The bicycle. Of course. I had forgotten that the professor wasn't on foot.

"Well, trying to find some trace of his passage might be a place to start, do you think?"

Rudy was frowning.

"Yes, I think so. If there is anyone who has an idea of what else might be out there, it would be him. That is if anyone does."

"He may still be there for all we know."

I was only hoping against hope, of course. I knew as well as Rudy that the professor would probably be long gone, but maybe there would be some trace of him staying there, or some clue somewhere of where he might have headed. It had been a long time though, from what Rudy said, years even. Adler could well be miles away, hundreds of miles. He could be dead, a pile of bones somewhere.

Or another ghost?

I couldn't think of a better plan though. I knew that I had to keep going, even if it meant the risk of bumping into zombies or this CutterJack person.

For the next couple of hours we travelled down the hill, negotiating our way through the rocks. The cart was becoming a bit of a hindrance now that the ground was more uneven. I hoped that when we got down into The City that the roads or paths would be easier ground.

I was down to four bottles of petrol for the lantern now, and thanks to the river near the shack, twenty bottles of water. I still had a dozen torches and a whole heap of dried pods left, even some of the mushrooms.

Light was becoming less of a problem now, and most of the time we travelled in the dark. My eyes seem to be adjusting even more to it as each day passes, and neither DogThing nor Rudy seem to have a problem seeing.

Am I going to end up with strange, bright, googly eyes like DogThing? Like that Gollum creature from *The Hobbit*.

We eventually made it down onto the flat ground and the edge of The City. The layout was the strangest thing I'd seen in a while. It wasn't like any other settlement I'd seen. It was almost like someone took a big old chunk of London and dumped it here. There was no build-up of smaller buildings or suburbs like every other town or city I'd ever been to. The road where we first entered the ruins just "started" right next to the first building, cobbles and all. Yes, real cobbles. They made the cart almost impossible to push.

I don't know why I was expecting a modern city, or even vaguely recent buildings. As we had travelled down through the rocks towards the looming buildings I'd had a chance to get a rough layout of the place. The slope we were travelling down was quite steep, and we had been at least a few hundred feet above The City when we started down the rough track. There were only four streets in each direction, all

crossing like a grid, like the blocks in New York, but this place was nowhere near as new. I'm not much of an expert on old buildings, but I'd have said that they were a few hundred years old, and most of them looked like they hadn't collapsed over the years. To me they looked like they had been bombed. Dotted here and there along the pavement were clumps of glowing grass, like up near the shack. It gave the streets an eerie alien feel.

Most of all I noticed how quiet it was.

We walked up the first street, with DogThing following us a few feet behind. He was alert, I could tell; I've somehow gotten used to reading some of his behaviour. And he was jitterish; on edge.

The street was called Charleston Way. The sign was rusty and hanging off a broken post that looked like something had smashed into it. I struggled over the cobbles and hauled the cart up onto the pavement. It was littered with piles of rubble and junk, but the slabs made it flat enough that the cart moved over it easily enough.

We headed towards the middle, passing run-down shops and flats. I glanced into one of the shop windows, through a hole in the glass. I could vaguely make out what might have been shelving and display cabinets, but it was too dark in there to get a proper look.

"Hold up."

Rudy peered through the window.

"Did you spot something?"

"I don't know, maybe just junk, but you never know, might be something in there."

I pulled the cart up alongside the door to the shop and grabbed the lantern. It only took a few seconds to light it. I was getting quite quick at it now. I grabbed the mace and used the sharp, nasty end to push the front door open.

The door fell off.

I'd barely touched it, the lightest prod, but it was enough to send the door off its hinges and crashing down with a loud bang. Dust flew everywhere; a huge cloud of it billowed up upwards, until it made a signal that would be visible for miles (if anything could see for miles).

DogThing ran. He was fifty yards down the street before he stopped and sat down to watch me from a safe distance.

"Crap. I didn't want to do that."

"Hmm, no, maybe not," said Rudy, from behind me.

Big, deep sigh.

"Well, that kind of settles it then. If there is anyone here, they now know we are."

"Or a *thing*. I'll keep lookout, out here," said Rudy.

I stepped over the collapsed door and shone the lantern into the shop. Most of the dust had gone outside, so I could still see clearly. Strewn across the floor were empty tin cans and ripped boxes. I picked up one of the boxes nearest me. It was torn and covered in dark, mouldy stains.

Weetabix. Empty. Damn.

It was the same along every row, counters full of ripped and damaged packaging that was either empty, or had contents that I wouldn't have touched, even if I was starving.

Then I reached the back of the shop.

There, on what looked like the shop counter, right next to a smashed-up cash till, was a cardboard box with cans of tinned food carefully stacked into it. I emptied it out onto the counter to see how big a find it was. Peaches, beans, stewed steak, mushy peas, there were a few of each type of can, all unopened and seemingly undamaged.

"Bingo."

I packed the tins into the box again and walked round the back of the counter, all the time wondering who would leave a box of food tins lying around. Maybe someone had packed them and meant to take them away, but for some reason hadn't been able to? Not a comforting thought.

Then I found out why they were still there.

There was a door at the back of the counter, this one also hanging off its hinges. There was a light coming from inside, and a noise that sounded like wasps swarming.

Or flies.

Masses of them buzzed around.

The room was only small but the devastation was huge. Whatever had happened in there had happened quite recently, like within a few days, or a week at most. It was all disgustingly fresh. Blood was scrawled all over the walls and collected in little, congealed pools across the floor. Scattered here and there were the remnants of someone or something, chunks of bones and flesh, and other stuff that I couldn't identify, didn't want to identify. In the corner a small electric lamp lay on the floor, plugged into some kind of battery. It was still on.

Then the smell hit me. I stepped out of the room and threw up all over the counter. I felt my heart rate screaming and panic about to take over.

"Rudy..."

He was already there.

"Oh, my God."

It took me a minute or so to regain control of my faculties, hanging off the side of the shop counter with my head spinning, and my stomach lurching.

"This was recent, wasn't it?"

I looked up. Rudy was standing in the doorway, staring at the mess.

"Do you think it was... a person?"

"Had to be..."

I turned away. I couldn't look at it again. Zombie bits were one thing, but a real person I couldn't handle.

"Wait though. No."

Rudy had gone into the room.

"This skin, it's not human skin, it's like lizard skin. It's all scaly."

That brought me to my senses. It wasn't a person.

I walked back to the door and stepped inside. Rudy was kneeling down near the back corner of the room. The stench was terrible. He pointed at a piece of the body, and when I took a closer look I could see exactly what he meant. Not only was the skin not human, but what I was looking at was the jaw of a lizard or cat-like creature.

"What the hell was it?"

Rudy stood up and left the room. I followed him.

"There are more than zombies, gargants and the Maw here. Adler always said there was. Come to think of it, he claimed he had seen the Maw, like your DogThing, fighting against another creature that was slightly larger, and covered in grey coloured scales, like a Maw but not hairy."

"I see. Well that looks greyish doesn't it? I can't tell with all the blood."

"Yes, like a lizard's scales even."

It was then that I noticed the footprints. I hadn't seen them when I was searching the shop. I guess I had been too busy checking what was on the shelves to take any notice of the floor. Starting from the carnage room behind the counter, and running straight in line towards the entrance, were bloody footprints. Human footprints. There were also other footprints that might have been paws, lots of them.

Someone had run out of the place after the lizard thing had been killed. Someone in a hurry, and they might have had Maw with them, or chasing them.

I followed the footprints out of the shop and further along the street, but they soon disappeared on the wet cobbles, twenty yards along the street. They ended in the middle of a street crossing, right next to a manhole cover. The paw prints split off and went in all directions.

Rudy was right behind me, as was DogThing, who seemed to be over his scare from the noise of the collapsing door.

"Do you think...?"

Rudy's eyes shone in the dim glow. They said exactly what I was thinking.

"They escaped."

"Yes."

"Whoever it was that was in that room managed to slaughter that lizard thing and then escape this way."

"Chased by the Maw? Or maybe more of the lizard cat things? I'm not much of a tracker. Wasn't in the Scouts when I was a kid."

Rudy stood frowning at the manhole cover and then back at me.

"You're not seriously thinking of going down there are you?"

I shrugged.

"There's a chance of finding someone else, someone alive and recently here. I can't ignore it!"

"Oh, crap."

Rudy sighed.



"You have no idea what's down there. It could be crawling with God knows what. Zombies and, well there are a lot of other dangerous things in this place that I can't even begin to describe."

"You think I shouldn't look?"

Rudy was pacing the ground now.

"I'm not saying that. Just, well, you only have that spiked stick, and whatever went down there..."

"Whoever went down there."

"...whoever then. You don't know that it's a person. It could be a zombie. It could be CutterJack."

I nodded. I'd forgotten about CutterJack. Don't ask how. I just had.

"It could be Adler."

We set up for the next night in one of the buildings across from the shop, hoping that whoever had gone down the manhole might come back up again at some point, then we could check them out at a distance. Rudy was on watch again as I spent the rest of the day searching the half dozen other derelict shops on the street.

Found a box of cigarettes! Ten packets! They're a bit dry, and they don't smell so good, but I tried one and they smoke pretty well. Guess I'm not the fussiest of people these days.

You know, I'd forgotten that I had run out. I guess I've been trying to avoid thinking about it, but I think I had my last smoke sitting under the ten-feet-tall mushroom in the rain. Back before I crossed the plateau. It seemed as good a place as any.

Something strange was bothering me as I thought of my "last cigarette" moment, something niggling in the back of my mind. I can't figure out what. I remember sitting there under that enormous mushroom, smoking, and frowning at the empty packet. I kept thinking that there was something odd about the brand. Nothing really odd, they were just Mayfair cigarettes. I really can't figure out why it's been bothering me ever since then.

I don't recognise these new cigarettes. The name on them is in Chinese, or some other glyph-like language, maybe Korean?

Found two packets of unopened dry noodles in the last shop and a harmonica, but nothing else of real use. I can't play harmonica. Maybe I need to learn.

Decided to take a quick inventory. Figure out what I have left.

DIY backpack

"ZombieBane" Mace

Harmonica. (It works! I just can't play it.)

Pair of petrol lamps

4 bottles petrol

18 bottles water

9 torches

Electric lamp + Battery

Torch (no batteries)  
Screwdriver, 3 hammers (1 broken), spanner.  
12 tins of food + Pods (lots) + Mushrooms (3 big ones)  
2 packets of noodles.  
2 DIY knives + Kitchen knife  
Cigarettes / Wallet / Car keys  
Journal + Pens  
Deodorant + 3 towels  
Namibia travel guide (Why?)  
Mouthwash (Nearly empty)  
Sunglasses + sun tan lotion (Nearly empty)  
Sofa pillow + Blanket  
Plastic bottles x 13 in sack  
2 bits of hose pipe  
Half a Curtain  
A dozen magazines  
Lots of plastic sheeting  
Adler's diary  
Rusty saw

Can't believe I actually named my mace. What am I? Conan the Barbarian?

I suspect that my cigarette lighter is going to run out soon. It's stuttering and taking several attempts to get a flame, and even then it's a weak one. I hope the petrol from the car wreck works in it. I'm sure I heard somewhere that it does.

I guess I'll find out soon.

## **Day 27**

I think I nearly died last night.

I was in a deep sleep. I know that because I was still dreaming some strange dream about glowing spiders when I woke up, even though the noise was loud enough to wake even the dead.

Rudy was standing inside the door, his hand to his mouth and one finger over his lips.

A voice in my head, that wasn't Rudy, spoke.

*"Silence."*

*"Don't make a sound."*

Something was trying to get into the building, and as the last of the spiders from my dream drifted away, the door shook violently. I'm so glad I propped that broken chair up against the handle.

Another violent shake. I was up, grabbing my mace and my knife. I crept quietly towards where Rudy was standing, fighting panic as my heart tried to leap right out of my chest.

Then it spoke. Not the voice in my head a moment before, warning me, no, this was another one. It was speaking in plain English and I understood everything that it said, but it was raspy and deep, the accent like none I had ever heard. Russian-sounding, but not quite.

"I know you are in there. Rat."

I almost bit off the end of my tongue stopping myself from calling out in fear.

The door shook again, this time even more violently. I heard something crack, and realised that whatever was out there was going to get in, and something told me this was no clumsy zombie.

Crack. The top hinge of the door broke. Bits of wood scattered across the floor.

Then there was growling, and a lot of it. I recognised DogThing's deep growl over the noise, but it wasn't just him out there. The others must have returned. Whatever it was that was trying to break down the door hissed in reply.

"Another time then. Rat."

Footsteps echoed away from the building and the growling followed. I pulled the chair away, opened the door, swung my mace back ready to strike, just in case, and stepped out.

DogThing was sitting in the middle of the street. I followed the direction of his gaze and was in time to see a bunch of Maw, a dozen or so I think, vanish round the corner of a building two blocks away.

Across the street the manhole was lying half open.

"I guess that answers our mystery," said Rudy.

I sat down heavily on the pavement, breathing deeply. "Screw this. That was CutterJack wasn't it?"

"Yes. That was CutterJack."

"I'd recognise that voice even if a hundred years had passed."

Rudy was standing in the doorway, watching the road.

"What the hell do we do now?"

"We leave."

We had to. If CutterJack came back and the Maw weren't here, I didn't stand a chance. I'd seen his shadow and the sheer size of him when the door began to break. For a moment the top corner of the door had leant inwards, giving me a glimpse of the monster that stood outside.

He was huge, tall enough to have to crouch down to be able to hit the door. Roughly? I'd say eight feet tall, and that's only a guess.

People don't grow that tall, do they? Not normally anyway. DogThing must have been out there the whole time, but it took a whole pack of Maw to scare CutterJack away. Now if that had been me, one DogThing would have had me running.

The mess in the shop had to have been made by him. I was convinced of it. Unless there were others around here, or the Maw and the lizard thing had a set-to and CutterJack had arrived afterwards.

I don't know. I don't know.

I packed my stuff back into the cart as fast as I could, dumping a lot of stuff to make it lighter. The travel guide and the magazines went, making a surprising difference. I'd not realised how heavy they were until I left them behind. Why had I been keeping them anyway?

Distance.

We had to put some distance between us and CutterJack, and then hope we hadn't left enough of a trail for him to follow. I wouldn't have a clue about tracking someone, but I also didn't know how skilled CutterJack was. I had a horrible sickly feeling that he would be able to follow us anywhere, if he wanted to.

I reckon it was less than two minutes later when I hauled the cart outside onto the pavement.

Rudy was waiting for me, watching the road where CutterJack had fled.

"Which way?"

"The way he didn't go."

We headed along the pavement as quickly as the cart could go. DogThing eventually caught us up and followed us, always twenty or so feet behind, always scanning behind us and sniffing the ground.

We crossed a road, Maldon Street. I had to pull the cart backwards to get it over the cobbles, and haul it back up onto the pavement on the other side of the road. I stopped for a moment and looked down Maldon. Shop after shop lined the street, twenty of them, at least, and no time to look.

We hurried for another block and began to cross Merriwether Avenue. Odd name.

Rudy stopped in the middle of the road, frowning.

"Wait."

"What?"

"Be quiet."

Then I heard it too.

Music.

Somewhere nearby music was playing. It was quiet and echoed faintly down Merriwether Avenue. It sounded like it was coming out of a window high up somewhere, and I could see that further down Merriwether there was a row of three and four story Victorian style townhouses.

One of the buildings, right in the middle of the row, had a window wide open on the top floor. Long drape curtains were hanging out, swaying like they were caught in a breeze, even though I could feel no wind from down on the street.

There was a light on in the room.

"Is that?"

"Yes. Music. What the hell?"

I started walking down the street towards the house, for the second time in as many days wondering if I had found someone else alive, someone else other than CutterJack.

"Is this a good idea?"

Rudy was following me, but I could see he was hesitant. Why would a ghost be scared? It's not like he could die twice. I didn't consider until now, while I'm writing this, that if I died he would be trapped again, probably for a long time.

"I have no idea."

We approached the building slowly, checking every alleyway and door as we went. CutterJack had gone the other way, but he was tall, and I imagined he could move fast.

I stopped. Now it was my turn to be hesitant.

"What if we're just walking to CutterJack's house?"

"I'm with you. I say we just run."

We both started back down the street again, away from the house, but we'd only travelled a few feet when DogThing lowered himself to the ground and started growling. Nearby I heard more growling, and my nerves hissed as I saw two other Maw dart out from an alleyway that both Rudy and I had checked moments before. Neither of us had seen them.

Then we saw him, right down the other end of Merriwether, walking towards us casually, as though he was out for a stroll in the country on a Sunday afternoon.

CutterJack.

"You can't hide from me for ever, Rat. I got your friend and I'll get you."

We ran, straight for the house. My heart was thumping again as the front door rushed towards us. I nearly tripped on the cobbles at least twice, and I could almost feel him getting closer to us. I glanced back as Rudy ran up the steps to the front door.

Down the street, the Maw were holding him off, but there were only three of them and CutterJack had drawn out a pair of long blades and was swinging them in long swirling patterns as he walked slowly forwards. I turned and ran for the door, colliding with it, hoping it would open, but it was shut tight. Rudy stepped through the door and vanished.

"Rudy!"

Lots of growling and noise behind me.

I tried the handle. Still no luck. Then I rammed the door a second time with my shoulder, but it wasn't budging.

"Rudy!"

I glanced back over my shoulder to see CutterJack standing at the bottom of the steps, grinning at me. The three Maw, including DogThing, were lying in the street. One of them was still barely moving, twitching. I couldn't make out which Maw it was.

It was over. I knew it was. I pointed my knife at him and pulled my mace back, ready to fight. I didn't stand a chance, I knew that, but he had killed my dogs. I was going to hurt him before he killed me too.

I have no idea how it happened. It was all over far too quickly for me to recall it clearly. CutterJack leapt forward at me, much quicker than I had expected, taking the steps and the distance between us before I could even react. I had barely enough time to fall over onto my back. Something hit the door above me with a *bang*, then another, *thwack*. I tried to roll out of the way but felt my mace catch on something; only the weight of me falling off the front porch pulled it away. I think that was when I hit my head, maybe on the cobbles or on the porch steps as I fell. There was a scream. The kind of noise I imagined I would be making in a few moments. Or was it me screaming?

No pain came.

Everything went blurry for a while after that. I remember hearing someone bellowing at the top of their voice - it might have been Rudy, but when I came to my senses it had stopped.

It was all over, I was still breathing, and CutterJack was gone.

There was blood all over the sharp end of my mace.

A Buddy Holly song was blaring out of the window above me, and I couldn't remember which song it was.

I heard Rudy's voice nearby.

"Quickly, get up."

I staggered to my feet, still staring in wonder at the end of my mace, unable to figure out how the hell I had managed to fumble my way out of death.

"Where the hell were you?" I mumbled. I wanted to shout at him but my head was still spinning.

"I ran inside. I thought you would come through, but you didn't. I could see that you couldn't open the door, so I ran round the house, trying to find another way in, or see if there was someone else in there that could open the door. There wasn't."

"It's locked up."

"Yes. I figured as much. You have got to see in there."

I sat down on the porch steps, trying to catch my breath and slow my heartbeat down.

"Then I heard the noise from the Maw stop and I ran as fast as I could. I've no idea what I was going to do, but couldn't think of anything else. When I ran back through the door I ran straight into CutterJack. I screamed. I know, I know. You must think me a coward, but I'm terrified of him."

"No. You're all good there. I'm damn scared of him myself."

"Well, I think, I don't know, but I think I made him jump."

I looked up at this, almost smiled.

"You frightened him?"

"Well, I doubt that, but I don't think he expected someone to come running through a closed door. You do realise your mace was stuck in his leg don't you?"

"Was it? I thought it was caught on his clothes or something. I think I fell off the porch."

"Yes, you did, but so did he. He stumbled back from me and tripped over you."

At this I did laugh, and Rudy laughed too. I was avoiding looking over towards where I knew the Maw would be lying, dead. Anything mildly funny was enough for me at that moment.

Then Rudy stopped laughing, and his jaw almost dropped off. I followed the direction of his gaze, my stomach lurching as I expected to see CutterJack coming back again.

The Maw had gone.

"What the..."

"They've gone. How?"

"How the hell should I know?"

We both moved quickly then, jogging over to where we had last seen the Maw. My head was still fuzzy, but seeing the bodies of the Maw missing sobered me up fast.

No trace, nothing. There was blood over the cobbles, where they had each fallen, but not as much blood as I had expected.

"Let's get into the house, just in case he comes back," I said, heading over to grab the cart from where I had abandoned it.

"Um, James? I don't think he is coming back any time soon," said Rudy.

I stopped and turned round. Rudy was standing in front of the porch, staring at the ground.

"Why?"

"Because I think this is a bit of his leg."

I pushed the cart as quickly as I could and went over to look at Rudy's grisly find.

"Oh, hell! That's gross."

There was a lump of bloody flesh about the size of my fist lying in the street. I'd literally taken a chunk out of CutterJack.

"And if he does come back, he is going to need some new knives," said Rudy, pointing up at the door.

They were embedded at least six inches into the wood. One was protruding from the door, and the other was stuck hard in the wooden floorboards of the porch.

CutterJack had left his knives behind.

It took me about five minutes to pry the one out of the floor, while Rudy went round inside the building, trying to find a way I could get in. It was no small knife. The blade

was about two feet long and as sharp as a Stanley knife. Damn, if that thing had gone in me instead of the door...

The one in the door took longer. I'd just managed to pull it out when Rudy came back.

"There is a window at the back, on the second floor. I think if you can get up there you might be able to get in. There is a rope hidden behind the drainpipe. I didn't spot it at first. It's well hidden. All the other windows in the house apart from that one and the one on the top floor are all shored up on the inside. Someone made a fortress out of this place."

We left the cart at the front of the house, and made our way round the row of buildings and into an alleyway. It looked like someone had been shoving their junk into the alley for years. I had to climb over three fences before we got into the yard.

I couldn't see the rope, even when I looked behind the pipe. Then I noticed a bit of it poking out of a hole in the drain, high up near the window. It went inside through a small gap where the window had been left open, just a little bit. The rope was tucked into the pipe. Whoever had put it there had hidden it well, cutting a slit all the way from the top to the bottom and stuffing it inside.

### **Day 28**

We are holed up in the house. All the windows are shut and the door is locked. I hauled the rope up and pulled it back through the window. There is so much to say about what we have discovered in the house, but I've not had the time. Feeling sick and dizzy. I need to sleep.

I asked Rudy if he had spoken to me when CutterJack was trying to bang the door down in the building opposite the shop the night before. He says he didn't. I shrugged it off; maybe I'd imagined that I heard it, but I was almost certain that someone had spoken to me. It hadn't been CutterJack. Why would he have told me to be silent and still? He wouldn't have. Someone other than Rudy had told me, someone who didn't want CutterJack to find me.

*Silence.*

*Don't make a sound.*

### **Day 29**

Rudy thinks I may have had a slight concussion from when I hit the paving, after my fall. I remember being dazed for a while afterwards, so I guess he could be right. I don't have any injuries though, so if I did bang my head it can't have been too hard. I think I've just been feeling sick from fear, after nearly being butchered. I know, I've fought with zombies a couple of times now, and they are gruesome-looking, but they are slow, and I always had time to line myself up for each swing. Well, nearly every time. CutterJack was different, and I think that's why I've been feeling sick.

Luck. Just Luck. Nothing else. That was all that had kept me alive during my brief fight with CutterJack. If it hadn't been for me falling at the right time, and Rudy walking through the door at that same moment, CutterJack would have torn me to shreds. He was so fast. I barely even had the time to realise he was on me, let alone react.

What we found in the house was nothing short of a revelation, exactly what we needed.



Adler had lived here. No, we're not sure how long ago, could be a decade or more, or it could have been yesterday, but we found all kinds of maps and notes. I've read journal after journal detailing lots of random stuff about what he found here. I'm taking a few of them with me, hoping that if I get the chance at some point, I can put them in order, piece together everything, but for right now we found some quite interesting stuff.

This one, from a diary that looks old, put a smile on Rudy's face.

*"I regretted leaving within days. Of course I still knew my primary goal was to return home, but leaving Rudy was a hard thing to do. He wouldn't listen though, wouldn't hear reason. I decided that I should still make one journey back, one last attempt to convince him to leave.*

*Alas, my dear friend is gone. I returned too late. My tormentor must have followed me back to the shack, found Rudy, and ended him. It's my fault. I should have never taken the compasses, and I should never have given one to Rudy. What else could I do though? I had to stop CutterJack from doing what he has been doing for so long.*

*I couldn't stay and bury Rudy, though it pained me not to. CutterJack had killed Rudy very recently, maybe only hours before, so would still be close by. I had to keep moving. I'm sorry Rudy, for everything. If only I could explain.*

*The compass that I gave to Rudy was gone, either lost or back in the hands of that monster."*

"He came back." Rudy seemed pleased at that, and went quiet for a time.

There was more. A lot of what is in the journals is undecipherable, the handwriting is too messy. Maybe I can sit down some time, and figure it out, but for now I have to use whatever I can read in this dim light. I went back further, to a previous journal.

*"The compasses, they are his keys, how the damn thing works, I have no idea, but I know that the compasses that I took are the keys, and while they are not in his possession he can do no more evil. When I can retrieve the fourth, I may be able to figure out a way of using the device to escape, but with only three of them all I can do is hide them from him, and keep searching. I can't risk him catching me up and getting all three back so easily.*

*I went back to the first place that came to mind, somewhere that I knew would be ideal for hiding at least one of them, the scrap yard. The safe would still be there, hidden among the trash, where I found the stash of Roman coins. I'm so glad I still have the key for it. There were no constructs there, or there shouldn't have been. It took me quite a time to get back, but it was worth the trek.*

*I'm not sure what I will do with the third, for now I will stash it in the toolbox on the bus, and hope I can find somewhere more suitable. I need to go back to the bus anyway, to get the torch. I found batteries in one of the houses on Maldon Street."*

I stopped reading at that moment, and ran down the stairs to the cart. There it was, right where he said he had hidden it. How I had never spotted it, I don't know. I thought that I had emptied the box out. It was tucked inside a small compartment at the bottom of the toolbox, Adler's toolbox, the one that I had found on the bus.

Another compass.

I had two of them all along, and the third was in some kind of safe in the scrap yard. I didn't remember seeing a safe, but at least I knew where to start searching.

There was more in Adler's diaries; I skipped through them until I found what I thought might be the most recent. None of it was dated.

*"He nearly caught up with me again today, but was unable to keep up the speed once I put some leg work in. If I hadn't fixed up the chain on the bicycle, I think he would have had me. I was pleased to not have to hear a constant squeak as I rode, but it would seem that my efforts paid off tenfold."*

*"I have a dilemma. Considering what I have heard and seen, I can't in good conscience just give him back the compasses. But now I have him hunting me, and I'm not sure if I can keep up this game of cat and mouse for much longer. If it isn't him, then it's those damn creatures he has control of, disgusting abominations that they are. I had no idea that the creation of such a creature was even possible, or that anyone would have a mind twisted enough to conceive them in the first place, but then I suppose there are many things in The Corridor that don't make sense, or even follow the laws of nature. I should be used to the unexpected by now."*

"That would explain why the zombies were in the scrap yard when you arrived here," said Rudy.

"You mean they were searching for the safe? For the third compass?"

"Seems reasonable to me."

"I didn't see a safe anywhere. I know there is a shed-load of junk to hide one under, but..."

I stopped talking. Of course!

"James?"

"The microwave."

"The what?"

"There was something in the junk yard, right near to where I first arrived. I thought it was a television or a microwave, but it was a solid block of metal. It's quite possible it could have been a safe. I never managed to turn it over."

I asked Rudy what Adler meant by "The Corridor".

"That's what he called this place. He said he found it in one of the few remaining books in the library, said the building was somewhere in The City, but it was burnt out. There was half of a book left, a history book or something like it, detailing the past of The City."

"Strange thing to call it."

"Yes, though that was just what Adler called it, he said the name was obscured in the writing, The Something Corridor. Actually, I remember it now, he said the same went for The City, it was called something else. The 'The' was only part of the name."

"Adler was convinced that both the building and even most of The Corridor didn't exist here once. He thought that somehow it all just ended up here, like all of us, I suppose. I don't know if I believe all that, but I envied him that he even had some ideas. He was clever, the professor, and I'm a much simpler man than he was."

It's hard to imagine isn't it. Not only does it seem that I have ended up somewhere that I don't belong, but according to our mad professor friend, Adler, the place where I ended up shouldn't be here either.

I wonder if we are all in some kind of limbo, like purgatory, but that wouldn't make sense either.

Am I dead? I don't think so.

Not yet.

### **Day 30**

There were diaries everywhere, stacked up on shelves, piled high in corners, and left lying around in seemingly random locations. Neither of us knew where to begin. In a strange way, it was fortunate that most of them were completely illegible. I think that at some point the majority of them must have been soaked in water. Maybe the building wasn't watertight. There were some entries that I could still read, but a lot of that was meaningless garbage.

The light in the upstairs room was handy as hell. I didn't have to run down any of my own supplies. It was set up the same as the lamp had been in the shop, attached to a battery. It wasn't bright, but it was light enough to read by. The same battery powered the small tape player that was blasting out the same few songs over and over again, until I switched it off. How the battery had lasted so long I have no idea.

Dotted all round the house were the strange objects that Adler had collected. In the middle of one of the downstairs rooms there was a six-foot-tall statue made entirely of scrap metal. I wasn't sure what it was supposed to be. It looked like a kind of grotesque winged angel, and it was so intricate in design that it must have taken him weeks to build it. That is if he even made it himself. I suppose he could have found it somewhere. It didn't even need propping up. It stood there, balanced of its own accord.

Plates! Hundreds and hundreds of the damn things, all stacked on shelves or hanging on the walls. Some were actually real plates, either plastic or metal or crockery. Is that what they are called? Crockery? What the hell is a crock anyway? I don't know. Most of them were those display things you see in pubs and old houses. Who needs that many plates anyway? The cooker doesn't even work, without any electricity.

The best find for me was the wardrobe full of clothes. It seemed that Adler had made quite a collection of clothing over the years, and most of it looked about my size. After close to a month in the same rags, I was glad to dump them in exchange for something that was at least clean. I found a couple of pairs of reasonably undamaged jeans and put a pair on. A full change of clothing later I felt a lot more comfortable, and glad to be rid of those oversized, ripped up, and dirty trousers.

There was more in the wardrobe. Stuffed into the bottom were three pairs of boots. Proper walking ones. Again they were a bit tatty, with worn treads, but they were so much more comfortable than the tatty boots that I'd been wearing for a month. There was also a belt with some small carry pouches on it, like the ones hikers wear. I stuffed some of my more important things into each of the pouches. My lighter, keys, wallet, a bottle of water, the journal fitted in there with some room still left. There were

even little knife holders and a strap that held the battery torch. Don't know why I put the harmonica in.

Strewn all over the house, either in boxes or stuffed onto shelves, was every type of tool imaginable. Dozens of hammers and saws, boxes of screws and nails. There was even one of those electric bench cutters plugged into a wall socket. Completely useless - at least that is what we thought. How the hell had Adler got that thing into the house? Maybe it was already here when he arrived?

Then Rudy called me. He was in the back room on the ground floor. All the windows were blocked up and the back door out into the garden was boarded over double thick with wooden planks. Set up in the middle of the room was something I hadn't expected.

The front half of a car.

The wheels had been removed and the whole frame was propped up on rows of bricks. All of the metal panelling had been removed to reveal the engine, the dashboard and the ignition. He'd even removed the steering wheel.

Where the exhaust should have poked out there was a long bendy plastic pipe attached. It was hanging on bits of string that were nailed to the ceiling. The pipe ran across the room and up the chimney, where it was nailed to the wall about three feet up, just below a metal grid that blocked the chimney, but let the air in.

The key was still in the ignition, so I turned it, not expecting a damn thing to happen, but it did. The engine coughed a little, and spluttered, and then gave a roar that made me nearly jump out of my skin. It juddered and hummed away happily.

It was noisy, but I thought screw it, it's not like I've been that effective at staying hidden anyway.

All the lights in the house came on.

Rudy was pointing at something, something lying on a chair in the corner of the room. It was another journal. One that looked more recent than the others. The ink was much clearer than the other books. Of course it could still have been written years ago.

There was only one entry.

*"I found the fourth key and I'm going to collect the others now. Hopefully I can make it all the way to the device and activate it. Maybe, just maybe, it will take me home. During CutterJack's curses and taunts, while he was outside the house, he let slip about some of his deeds on earth, the things he took, the horrific and brutal things he did to people. So overcome with his own pride, that terrible creature. He didn't even realise that the threats of what he had done to his past victims were giving away clues as to how to resolve my own predicament.*

*Even if it takes me somewhere completely different, it has to be better than here. I could cope reasonably with another world, or even another universe, but to be stranded in this dark and claustrophobic place for the rest of my days, for ever hunted by a creature of such evil intent. That is a thought that makes me cold to my heart. I cannot even bear to contemplate the possibility of becoming one of his abominations.*

*Of all the places the key could have been. I would never have guessed. Why would someone have poked it under the door? How did I not see it there before? I spent*

*hours gazing at that white flower. Maybe someone pushed the key under there because they didn't want CutterJack to find it.*

*I thought I would never know, until that damnedest of creatures came to taunt me once more, a few nights ago.*

*It was something he said, about chasing one of my predecessors up to the door that 'Those ones has locked in on me'. His English is thoroughly common, no, that would be an insult to common folk, a barbaric half wit at best. Regardless of that, he murdered the man right there, right where we had camped for all those days while Rudy and I tried to get the door open. I'd never even thought to look there, and I wasn't looking for a key when I went there. Something knotted up inside me. I had to go and look up there, to see if there was any evidence of CutterJack's victim. There was. That pile of rocks hid more than other bits of rubble.*

*I covered the poor man back up again after I said a few words. It was the least I could do. In a way I feel that his life was extinguished to my benefit, as self-centred as that may sound. If he had not died there then CutterJack would never have mentioned it, and in turn I would never have been led to find the final piece of the puzzle. I swore I would place a memorial of some kind to my anonymous benefactor one day. I only regret that there was no form of identification upon the remains. I will never know who he was.*

*I'm leaving my diaries here, in case someone else happens to end up here. CutterJack can't read. If he could, he would have been able to understand the note that I left for him, but I could see from my hiding place, peering out of the top window of the house, that he couldn't. He looked too puzzled. He also can't get into the house if it's secured properly. He tried often enough. I don't think he is the cleverest of creatures. How he gained the knowledge to do such things as he does, I have no clue.*

*My journey will have to take me across the swamp, even though I dread the mere thought of it. Every other way is crawling with his creatures.*

*If you are reading this now then I hope that you will find the place that I travel to now, and I hope you find the device intact. Know now that it is the same device that CutterJack has used for centuries to travel to other places and perform his butchery, so beware of him on your journey. The device is located near to the wall, past the junkyard. The wall somehow marks the boundary of this place, how I cannot tell you, I have not yet discovered why, only that a scrawled note in a book that I found in the library suggests that it is dangerous to go beyond the Wall.*

*'Do not, ever, ever, cross to the other side of the wall from the ground.' it said, and 'Seek the house that was never built.'*

*I didn't know what that meant when I first read it, but it's obvious when you are there. You'll know it when you see it."*

*Rudy and I stood quietly for what seemed a long time. It was he who spoke first, but we both knew what this last note meant.*

*"He never made it did he?"*

*"Doesn't look like it. He never got the key from the bus, otherwise I never would have found it, and he never came back to where you died to find the other one."*

"He went through the swamp. Why? That's just suicidal."

"I don't think he had much choice."

"No, I suppose not, but I'd rather face those, what do you call them?"

"Zombies."

"Yes, them. I'd rather have to fight my way through them than try and get through the gargants."

That reminded me of something I had never asked Rudy, since the dreams that led me to him.

"Do you remember that you said they weren't zombies, during my dreams, before I came to the shack?"

"Yes, of course."

"What did you mean?"

Rudy shrugged.

"I didn't know what a zombie was."

It took me five minutes to stop laughing.

Then I remembered something and stopped damn quickly.

"Damn."

"What?"

"I've already crossed the wall."

Rudy looked puzzled.

"In the professor's notes."

I took the book and showed him that last page.

"He says right there, don't cross over the wall from the ground. I've already done that. Well, once anyway. It was back when I first got here, I had a camp right against the wall. I had to leave it because it got overrun with zombies. It was when I met DogThing. I was running from the zombies and there was one that was in the way; it had a head that it was swinging."

"It was swinging its head?"

"No, it was swinging another head. It had hold of it by the hair. Well, I set fire to it and I had to jump over the end of the wall to escape it."

"Oh. I see."

We both stood quietly for a while.

"Do you think I'm screwed?"

"No. No. Look, Adler doesn't say why, does he?"

"No, I suppose he doesn't."

"Well it may only be some kind of warning. You know, don't go over the wall, there are all manner of nasty things over there. He doesn't actually say that crossing it is the bad thing."

"Yes he does. It says right there. Do not ever, ever cross from the ground."

"Well, you're still here, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Right."

"I miss DogThing."

"Yes. Me too."

### **Day 31**

The nausea and headaches seemed to have stopped, so I packed up my stuff. There was a proper hiker's backpack stuffed in among a lot of junk that the professor had collected. It was quite tatty, with a few holes in it, but fixable. From what I found in it, and threw away, he had probably used it a few times and then left it. It was huge. I couldn't imagine anyone going for any length of time on a bicycle with that monstrosity on their back. For me, it was a godsend. If we were to head into the swamp then I couldn't take my cart any more. I filled the pack with as many supplies and kit as I could, but left a lot of heavier stuff. I had to leave most of the petrol, and some of the water, behind, just because of the weight. I kept two bottles of petrol though. Fortunately seeing in the dark was no longer an issue. My eyes adjusted alarmingly fast to the darkness now.

I even managed to attach the two long blades that CutterJack had left behind to the back of the pack, after I had wrapped them in a tatty grey shirt that looked too small for me anyway. I wasn't having those two sharp blades hanging loose; one accidental fall and they would dice me. I'd like to say I made decent holders for them. What were they called? A scabbard? But that wasn't the case. I'd have to untie them if I needed them. It was kind of handy and reassuring. I had this horrible image of CutterJack sneaking up on me and pulling his blades off my pack. The same image was less worrying when it involved him standing there for five minutes untying them. I locked up the house again and stuffed the rope into the pipe.

We set out a few hours after I'd woken up, moving as quickly as we could out of The City and making a direct route to the swamp. There were no Maw around now, so I was uneasy for the first hour or so. The ground was hard, mostly rock, so signs of us passing were few, at least as far as I could see.

I think it took us about three hours to reach the small group of buildings at the edge of the swamp. Neither of us had expected to see buildings there, let alone ones so intact. We started checking rooms, and finally found some kind of camp fire in a room on the ground floor of the largest house. There was no way of knowing if it had been left years ago by the professor.

While Rudy took a look round some of the other buildings, I walked down to the swamp's edge. There were a few small pods growing in a bush right next to where the path started. Of course, I hadn't expected there to be a path either. It was about ten feet across, and made from piled-up earth and rocks that had flattened from use. Who had used it, I don't know. I presumed that it had been made a long time ago.

The path twisted through the swamp in a snake-like fashion. Dotted here and there were large rocks jutting out of the stinking mud.

"Well that makes our journey a little easier," said Rudy when he saw the path.

"Aye. I wonder if it goes all the way across."

"Well I've never seen a path on the other side, but it could be hidden or come out in an area that I've not been to. I've been along a lot of the shoreline on the other side of the swamp, but I didn't always follow the edge. There are large areas of rocks that I just went round."

"I guess we will find out."

Rudy wanted me to rest in one of the buildings before we moved on. He was convinced that I might not get another chance, but I wanted to put as much distance between myself and CutterJack as possible. Even if he was wounded, I still had this gut feeling that it wouldn't stop him following us if he found our trail.

The trail meandered through the swamp for what seemed miles, and I was glad of it, because away from the hard ground was deep sludgy mud. I had thought that all of the plants I'd seen growing in The Corridor were strange, until I walked through that swamp.

Clustered all along the trail were plants weirder than anything I had ever seen. Dotted here and there were huge, bulbous, green blobs, fifteen feet across, with spikes that looked like sharpened spears jutting out of them. Massive lily pad plants, probably twenty or thirty feet in diameter, hung a few feet above the sludgy mud, the underneath covered in thick, moving tentacles that seemed to sift through the swamp, occasionally popping up with some unfortunate creature that it would then wrap in tentacles until the creature vanished from sight into a tight cocoon. There were reeds that must have been fifty feet high, reaching upwards into the darkness, glistening with something that looked sticky, and crawling with strange cockroach creatures the size of my fist. And the mushrooms; I had thought the mushrooms I found in the field near the junkyard were massive, but these things stood almost the size of a house.

After a couple of miles of walking along the path it became clear that it didn't head towards the shack, but with a bit of debate, we figured out how to roughly guess where we were heading.

"The zombie trail," said Rudy. "Somewhere along the trail that runs the other side of the swamp I'd say."

"Maybe it will be clear. Maybe we killed most of them in the fight at the shack."

"Maybe."

He didn't sound convinced.

"We have a bigger problem though. Look."

He was pointing along the path.

We had passed quite a few of them while negotiating our way along the swamp trail. Fortunately they were all a long way away. I'm not sure how, luck probably, but each time we saw another one, they were far enough away not to notice us. We were moving quickly, not wanting to be down in the swamp any longer than we had to, but as we started to see rocks and dry ground in the distance, probably four or five hours after first setting off across the swamp, our luck ran out.

A gargant was sitting on the path, a massive gargant. It was easily the size of a double-decker bus, and was right over the path, sprawled out, munching on some of the odd vegetation that grew all over the place, and it didn't look like it had any intention of moving.



"Crap."

"Err, James. It gets worse."

"What?"

"Behind us."

They'd found us, at least a dozen of them, behind us on the trail, staggering slowly along. For all I knew there were more hidden in the mists that obscured my vision past a hundred yards or so.

The zombies were back.

"Double crap."

"We're trapped. This is not good."

"Ok, no panicking."

My mind raced. I was panicking. I grabbed my mace and tried to decide which form of death I was going to face first. No Maw with us to fend off the zombies, and not even the slightest clue what to do about moving a gargant, which to make it worse, seemed to have noticed us and was hauling its fat butt off the ground and along the trail, no doubt with the intent of coming over to munch on me.

"I hope you like swamps Rudy, because if we can't think of something fast, you might be following a gargant around for a while."

I dropped my pack to the ground and fumbled for the bottles of oil. I knew that the zombies could be burned, and there was no way I was going to handle a dozen of them on my own.

Why the hell does everything take so much longer when you are in a hurry? If I had been hunting for something else, the damn petrol would have been sitting on the top of everything else.

"What now?" asked Rudy. He was hovering next to me. The fear rising inside me was equally detectable in his voice.

"Pray," I snapped back, and felt immediately guilty.

I poured the first bottle of oil onto the ground, drawing a line all the way across the trail, and then stepped over it onto the side where the gargant was. It only took a couple of flicks of my lighter, and the oil burst into flame. The roaring heat quickly swept along the line and rose up nearly to my waist. I had to jump back away from the flames. Foul-tasting smoke filled my lungs.

The zombies were now about thirty feet away and closing slowly. The nearest one was another bizarre creation that should never have walked. It had two heads, one right where it should have been, but facing in the wrong direction entirely, and the other protruding from its bulbous stomach. There were far too many eyes glaring at me out of that bloated, rotten face, and each of them with sheer hatred.

The zombies didn't seem at all fazed by the fire, but then I didn't expect them to be. I had to hope that they would carry on moving slowly enough for my thin line of fiery defence to catch them. Otherwise I was screwed.

The gargant on the other hand was reacting in a way I hadn't expected. It screamed, loudly. I mean extremely loud, as loud as a fire alarm going off right next to

your face kind of loud. That piercing noise would have carried across miles if echoes had even worked here. I felt the noise reverberating through my skull, and for a panicked moment thought my head was going to explode.

That would have been a really rubbish way to go out.

The enormous slug didn't like the fire, or it didn't like the brightness, or the heat, or something, and with that sudden realisation I grabbed my pack back and pulled out one of the remaining torches, lighting it on the burning path. As stupid as I thought it was I started forward towards the gargant, burning torch in one hand, bottle of oil in the other. I would never have been this reckless and stupid back home. I hadn't a clue at the time how much I would regret it later.

"What are you doing?" shouted Rudy.

I almost laughed.

"James! Have you completely lost your mind?"

"Absolutely."

I glanced back at the fire to see the first of the zombies walk mindlessly into it. BellyFace had caught fire a treat, and was a walking inferno in seconds. Damn if those eyes didn't start popping. But he was still stumbling forward, a walking Guy Fawkes, still intent on coming for me. The second zombie stepped into the flames.

I turned back to the gargant, my main problem, and nearly jumped back again as I discovered that I was only about twenty feet away from it. Trust me, twenty feet is way too close when it comes to a giant tentacle slug.

It reared forward at me, screeching. I had seriously pissed it off. I began waving the torch backwards and forwards and psyching myself up, ready to hurl the oil at it. It was furious, screeching at me at the top of its voice and throwing out tentacles and spit, to try and knock the torch out of my hand, but it wasn't coming any closer. It didn't like fire, and it liked it even less when I threw the oil on the ground and lobbed the torch at it.

Fact: Zombies burn well.

Important fact: Gargants burn so much better.

They also move through swamp a lot faster than I expected. I hadn't even seen the other ones approaching, but soon spotted them when the burning gargant went screaming off through the muck towards them at full speed. It was popping and sizzling and leaving massive bits behind as it bulldozed its way through the other gargants, which in turn were catching fire as the one that I had lit up smashed into them one by one.

Then I realised why they burned so well. It wasn't the gargant at all. It was the damn swamp, the stuff the gargant was covered in. It must have been oil, or even some form of gas being given off by all the dead and rotten crap. It didn't matter. It still meant the same thing.

The swamp was on fire.

A burst of flame erupted from the mud, reaching up into the darkness like a geyser, spewing out hot steam and launching a spray of hot fiery mud over everything was nearby. I was lucky to be out of range. The hot mud splattered across the swamp and

spread the fire even further. Then with one almighty whoosh the fire took hold, and geysers burst upwards every ten feet or so, launching debris over everything. Soon the flames were spreading out from where the gargants were burning, sweeping across the swamp at such a speed I barely had time to react.

I looked around for any form of cover, but there was nothing nearby, just clumps of vegetation and a scattering of rocks. I spun back round to where my pack was lying, about thirty feet away, reaching distance for the zombies that now crawled their way along the trail. My flaming barrier had set fire to them but it wasn't stopping them.

Rudy was edging his way along the path towards me now, keeping his distance from the zombies. They couldn't hurt him. I guess that was one of the advantages of already being dead, but that didn't stop him being afraid of them. He glanced at my pack as he passed it and looked worriedly at me, then picked up his pace.

Across the swamp the fire was spreading fast. All around me was lit up like a furnace. I think I was lucky that it wasn't gallons of pure oil. I can't imagine what the explosion would have been like if it had been.

No way to go back and get my pack, not even my mace, which was lying on the floor next to it. Oh for hindsight!

*"Run."*

That voice was in my head again, the same one that spoke to me when CutterJack first showed up.

*"Run. Don't go back. Don't stop. Just run."*

Rudy caught up with me, as the flames swept over the path where I had dropped my pack. The zombies, about ten feet behind him, were consumed by the inferno seconds later.

*"Don't go back."*

Who was in my head? It wasn't Rudy. It wasn't CutterJack. The voice was softer, almost feminine, but not quite.

*"Run. Run. Run."*

I ran, finally snapping out of my fears, taking off along the path as fast as my legs would carry me, cursing at myself out loud with every breath.

Then it was there. The end of the path, and dry ground, fifty or so feet away, close enough to hope, but yet it still seemed so much further. Time seemed to stop dead for me. That sprint through the fire seemed to last for ever, and I could feel the heat of the flames burning my back as I finally hit the rocks and struggled upwards out of the swamp.

I had no idea if Rudy was with me. I hadn't looked back once.

It was the path that saved me. The rocks and dry, sandy ground gave the flames nothing to burn, so the fire swept past me on both sides. It reached the end of the swamp much sooner than I did.

At the top of the slope I collapsed, rolled over onto my back, and lay there, stunned, as the expanse of the swamp behind me lit up in flames. Gargants were screaming, unable to escape from the heat. All of those strange, alien plants were destroyed, one by one turning black and then withering to nothing as the fire consumed them. I

watched, dumfounded and horrified, as a line of behemoth-sized mushrooms in the distance lit up like bonfires, burning bright blue for a few seconds, before collapsing.

Rudy sat down next to me, and we both watched as the entire swamp burned. What else could we do?

"Well that went better than I thought it would," said Rudy eventually.

I laughed and laughed. I have no idea why that was my reaction. I could have just completely incinerated an entire ecosystem for all I knew. That swamp might be the only place in the entire universe where some of those things grew. The gargants, as much as they disgusted and frightened me, hadn't actually done anything to harm me, yet, and I'd roasted a heap of them.

"Well I'm glad you find all of this funny."

"It's not. It's not funny at all."

After about ten minutes, Rudy went back into the fire, walking unharmed through the flames and along the path. It had been his idea, even though I had thought about it. I didn't want to ask him. Dead or not, I wouldn't have volunteered to step into a burning fire. But it seemed that during my run out of the inferno I'd inadvertently dragged him right through the flames. I didn't know what he meant at first, but then realised that he was bound to stay near me, near the key. If I ran, he had no choice but to follow.

If our judgement was correct, and I went down the slope as far as I could without getting scorched, then he might be able to get to the pack and see if there was anything worth salvaging. He paused for a moment before stepping into the fire, and I cringed as he disappeared from view. There's something not right about being able to walk through a blazing fire.

He came back a few minutes later with a dour look.

"There may be some things left, but most of it looks burnt beyond scavenging. I don't know if it is worth waiting for I'm afraid. Some of the tins of food might be usable, but most of the rest has been destroyed. Your mace is still there, and I think CutterJack's blades are under the burnt pack, but I couldn't move anything to get a better look."

"I have to wait."

"What? But the flames might take days to go away."

"I don't have any choice. I have to wait at least a few hours. I don't have a weapon, other than a couple of poxy knives. They won't do me much good if I have to kill zombies, or if CutterJack turns up again. I left it all there."

"We can make it to the shack in a day, if we don't stop, maybe."

"Have you forgotten where we are? The zombie trail..."

"Of course I hadn't forgotten, but the zombies are slow, you could outrun them, outwalk them even."

"All the way to the shack? We don't even know exactly how far it is, and I'm already knackered."

"Ok. We wait. Maybe you're right. Maybe it will be gone in a few hours."

We both looked over at the swamp. If anything, the flames were getting higher.

"Maybe."

I checked my pouches. No food. I had one bottle of water, but other than that I had little more than I had started with over a month ago, just the things that I had put in the pouches that morning. I put my head in my hands and felt like crying. I think if Rudy hadn't been there I would have done.

Instead, my mind started racing, trying to find a plan to hold on to, something to stop me going completely insane. I had to find more supplies, fast. I knew I could get pods from along the swamp's edge, if I could find a bit that wasn't burning. There were pools of water in among the rocks up near the shack, but that meant going back there, going back to where there might be more zombies.

All of this and we were still no nearer to finding out where Adler had gone.

I slept underneath an overhanging of rock that we found a few hundred yards back from the swamp. It was about as far as I could go before I was ready to collapse, which completely put an end to Rudy's idea of keeping moving until we made the shack. I was breathing heavily and kept coughing up black crap. I guess I hadn't realised how bad the fumes from the fire had been.

I lay there for a while, huddled on the floor, trying to get comfortable enough to sleep without my blanket and my pillow. That pillow had stunk, but I would have given almost anything for it now. I couldn't get it out of my head, going over and over everything that had happened in those few seconds on the path. Everything lost because I took the pack off.

It would seem that I was out for the count for probably double what I normally slept; at least that's what Rudy said. Not that he has a clock to keep time by. Maybe being a ghost for years and years forces you to learn other ways of dealing with things. He also said I was coughing most of the time, and he even tried to wake me because he was worried that I was going to conk out on him. I didn't wake up, no matter how many times he called me, and of course he couldn't nudge me.

## **Day 32**

The last bottle of water only lasted until the morning. My throat was dry and sore and the water seemed to be the only thing that helped.

We headed back to the swamp, slowly. I hadn't felt this bad since I had first woken up in the junkyard, though at least it wasn't my whole body that was aching, only my chest and my throat. I think my hearing is worse as well, and all I can smell is a harsh, burnt stench.

The flames were still burning hours later when we got back to the edge of the swamp. A bit of luck though. The flames along the swamp trail had died down a little. Not completely, but enough that I might be able to make my way back along to where my pack was.

I was about to go for it when a low growl a few feet away absolutely made my day.

Right behind us, about twenty feet away, perched on a rock, watching, was a scruffy, furry canine with teeth that were far too big for its mouth and bright eyes the size of my fist.

It cocked its head to one side and made a snorting noise that almost sounded like "Oops".

DogThing.

If I could have given DogThing a hug at that moment, I would have done, but I don't think he would have appreciated it. There were no visible signs of any wounds that he might have taken during the fight in the street, but I was certain he was missing a few bits of fur. Not that it appeared to have made any difference. He seemed his usual self.

Rudy did his best to try to persuade me not to go into the fire, but what does he understand? He is already dead. He doesn't have any attachment to material things any more. He seems to have forgotten that he once depended on them. Well, apart from the compasses; he was fidgety until I showed him that I still had those tucked away on the chain, under my shirt. God forbid I lost them.

I almost backed out anyway; even though the flames were nowhere near as bad as they had been the day before, it was still damn hot walking along the trail. Fires still burned on either side of the path as I made my way along it, and I had to dodge from side to side a few times to avoid them. Every step I took along the path left me increasingly paranoid about one of those damn geyser things exploding a few feet away from me, but nothing happened. I got to the remains of my kit without getting roasted.

It was almost a write-off, almost. ZombieBane was charred but thankfully still useable. I rummaged through the smouldering remains of my supplies with one of my knives. Most of the food and anything flammable, which meant pretty much everything, had burned, including the pack itself, but two tins were still intact. There was some plastic sheeting still useable, and the screwdriver, the saw, the spanner. One of the petrol lamps was also salvageable. I used the bits of plastic sheeting as a bag and dumped everything in it. How typical; just after I've got myself sorted with kit, I lose nearly all of it.

Underneath the blackened remains were CutterJack's two long blades. They were still pristine. Not even a speck of the ash clung to the blades. Of course, the cloth that I had wrapped them in was gone.

Incredibly, one of the zombies was still going. It was armless, legless, and burnt to a crisp, flapping around on the floor. Hissing and spitting at me, desperate to sink its teeth in. I jumped when it first made a noise; my nerves tingling. It was only about five feet away, and had laid perfectly still, smoking and stinking, the whole time I was sifting through my gear.

It felt so good to cave the damn thing's head in. One satisfying *crunch* later and it stopped moving. Am I becoming heartless? Yes, I think so. I don't have any sympathy for these creatures, and deep inside I know I should. Am I putting them out of their misery? Are they even in misery? I don't know, but it feels better to keep telling myself that.

My joy was short lived. That one smack on the zombie's head, and ZombieBane fell apart in my hands. I nearly took myself out in the process as a sharp piece of it sprang off and bounced off my leg.

Lucky this time.

I picked up the two blades that still lay on the floor and weighed them up. I didn't know if I was going to be able to use both of them at once, as CutterJack had. I guessed I would find out.

I actually walked up out of the swamp with a smile on my face. It was daft. After the disaster of the previous day, there was I, grinning from ear to ear. I was still alive after taking on a gargant and a bunch of zombies, I had DogThing back, and I still had some remnants of my kit to keep me going, not much, but enough. I kept telling myself that I'd done this once already, crawled out of the darkness with nothing and still lived, so I could do it all over again.

The first fight happened roughly an hour after that. We had set off immediately. Rudy tried to get me to rest up more. I was still coughing up crap, but I was determined to move on. It had only been an hour or so since I'd woken up, and although I was feeling knackered again already, I was not staying by the swamp, breathing in more fumes.

DogThing sensed them first, four of them, and we saw them long before they were anywhere near us. They lumbered slowly out of the darkness, mist swirling around them like some cheap effect in a low-budget horror film. No messing about this time, I was ready for them, well sort of, if I managed to fight with CutterJack's blades.

We took down two each, though DogThing did make the first kill, I'll happily give him that. Less than twenty seconds I would say, and they were in bits all over the ground. I was getting better at this.

CutterJack's blades rock.

I can't believe I just wrote that.

Idiot.

For most of the day we stayed a reasonable distance from the shore of the swamp. Is the edge of a swamp called a shore? I didn't want to stay too close. The fire was kicking up fumes that made me feel sick, so we used it as a distant guide to keep direction, only moving away when a gargant came into view. I was surprised to see some of them still moving slowly among the flames. I guess I hadn't wiped out a whole ecosystem after all.

Should I be pleased by that?

The good news was that after roughly half an hour of walking, the fire in the swamp dwindled, revealing a vast expanse of smelly gunk once more. We found a pool of clear water trapped in a small crevasse between some rocks. I was dubious at first about drinking it, but DogThing didn't hesitate. Strange, back home I would never have dreamed of sharing a drink from a pool of water with a creature as mucky as DogThing. I guess you get used to things.

We met three other groups of zombies that day. Fortunately there were only three or four of them each time, all ambling along the same route. They moved slowly, so most of the time it was *us* catching up with *them*. It didn't matter that I'd fought these creatures a number of times now, I'd still nearly wet myself every time we closed in on them. I was getting better at fighting them though, and quite proud that I was actually able to fight with both blades, sort of. In truth I only swung one at a time. I was too scared I'd slice my own foot off.

### **Day 33**

A second day travelling along the edge of the swamp.

The area on the zombie-trail side of the swamp was similar to near the shack - barely a few hundred feet of rocks and dirt, and it gave way to tall cliffs that rose up into darkness, though the rocks weren't quite so large and warren-like.

Pods grew in abundance along the edge of the swamp; much more so than near the shack. Rudy pointed out that there were few gargants along the trail to eat the pods. Maybe the gargants liked to avoid the zombies. It didn't matter. It meant I had a re-supply of food.

My geography was completely thrown by now. All I could go on was that the swamp would eventually lead us back to the shack, which is where we decided we needed to head. There was at least some replacement equipment there, probably not much, but even some torches and something to make a decent bag out of would help. There was of course the cave in the rocks, and the door. I had to go there again, just in case I'd missed something the first time. That was the plan at least.

I wish I still had my push cart.

No zombie groups today. I wonder where they have gone.

### **Day 34**

No more zombies again today. I managed to collect some more water and a few more pods.

We reached the shack finally. I think we kept going for close to ten hours before eventually sighting the waterfall. It must have been that long. I was exhausted, hungry, and cold. My chest wasn't so bad today though, not so much coughing.

I watched DogThing run off up towards the rocks at the edge of the plateau, before I closed and blocked up the front door.

A minute later and I collapsed on the bed.

There were no zombie bodies around the shack any more. I didn't notice that until I was drifting off to sleep.

### **Day 35**

After I awoke, I spent a few hours going through my stuff and replacing what I could from the shack. There were plastic bottles, and wood to make torches from. I took a blanket from the bed and made a rough sack out of one of the sheets.

DogThing came back and was tottering around the valley for most of the day. He followed us up to the cave in the rock face and sat there waiting as I climbed up the rope.

Nothing had changed up there. Not that I had expected it to. I searched around, glancing often at the rocks along one wall. Unlike the rest of the rock fall, which seemed as though it had come from the hole in the ceiling, maybe some kind of cave-in, the rocks there looked like they had been piled up carefully. I hadn't noticed it on our first visit.

Rudy sat watching the rock pile the whole time we were up there.



I found a long piece of stick covered with mud lying on the ground near the refrigerator. It was thin and it looked like someone had whittled the end away into a small hook shape.

"No more clues here then," said Rudy.

"No. Only this stick, which Adler may have used to get the compass."

"And that pile of rocks."

"Yes, the rocks."

"We're not going to disturb the grave are we?"

"No."

"Why come here then?"

"I just needed to know that what Adler wrote was true, I guess."

"I see. So where now?"

"Well, Adler found the last compass here. So I presume he had to have been carrying it. He would have had to come back to the shack to look for the one he gave you. Of course we know he never found that one."

"So he must have either gone on to get the ones in the junkyard, or gone somewhere else."

"Somewhere we missed."

"Ok, well we have to go for what we do know, and hope we find out where he went."

"Well, there is always The Warrens," said Rudy.

"The Warrens?"

"They run along the side of the plateau. You remember I said that the zombies don't go over the plateau? Instead they go round. Well, that is where they go. The professor and I went that way once, following the footprint trail in the dirt that the zombies left behind. It led us all the way through and out, not too far from the mushroom fields. There are a lot of different paths in the rocks and Adler did keep going back that way. I only went with him the once, and we stuck to the footprints. That doesn't mean he always did."

We headed back to the shack.

All quiet. No zombies today. I walked down to the swamp to see if there was any sign of the fire.

Nothing.

Even the gargants are not around.

### **Day 36**

We set off back towards the junkyard soon after I awoke, but rather than heading back over the plateau I took Rudy's suggestion and we made our way across the river, following the foot of the slope. I would rather have gone back across the plateau, but I couldn't ignore the possibility that The Warrens might be hiding something.

Rudy was cheerful today, and talkative.

"If you stand on the plateau and look down into The Warrens it's a sheer drop, too high to clearly see any of the paths that run through the rocks. It's the way that the zombies go when they are on their way to the junkyard, but they seem to stick to one particular path, and there are hundreds of different ways."

"So we can avoid the zombies by using another path?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure we should. It would be quite easy for us to get lost down there, but saying that, I'm still curious as to what Adler was searching for down there, and he went there a lot."

We travelled past the spot where Rudy had died, and were both a bit disturbed to find that it had been messed with. Some of the ground had been churned up and bones had moved, and I don't mean the bit that I had disturbed to get the compass.

"Maybe I should bury you?"

"What?" He looked shocked at that. I have to admit that it was a strange comment to make, considering he was standing right next to me, well, his ghost was.

"Your...remains. You're kind of just...maybe I should bury you?"

I pointed at the bones that were scattered along the riverbank, overgrown with the bright, glowing grass.

"No. It's ok."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I don't want you to. It would be like admitting I'm dead, and I'm still here. I don't believe I'm dead yet."

That was that. Decided.

Over the river bank the ground sloped downwards past the rocks and then flattened out into a rough, open plain littered with small stones and debris. The grass gradually thinned out and was replaced by hard, cracked ground that was covered in a kind of salty sand. It reminded me of some pictures I'd once seen in *National Geographic*, of the Gobi desert.

DogThing was waiting for us where the rocks ended and plains began. I like to think that somehow he knew where we were heading.

We stayed along the edge of the plain, near to where the plateau rose up, higher and higher in a sheer wall of marble until I could no longer see the top.

Across the barren ground, in long trailing lines, were sets of footprints. Rudy said that not even the storm and the rain managed to touch anything here, so the footprints were still there from the times that he and Adler had travelled through The Warrens, all those years ago. It was eerie seeing a small, thin bicycle track, cutting into the ground. I was excited about it at first, thinking that maybe it was a clue of some sort, but Rudy pointed out that Adler had always taken the bike with him, so the tyre tracks could well have been quite old.

Littered across the ground here and there were bones and junk. I didn't examine any of it long enough to figure out what kind of creature the bones belonged to, but they looked like they had been there for a long time.

We got to The Warrens a lot quicker than I expected. I would say about an hour across the plain, so only a few miles. They came into view through the mist and were so eerie that I almost stopped and turned back. I don't know how they were formed, but they didn't look natural. Sheer walls, maybe forty feet high, lined a dozen entrances. The rock arched at the top, almost like it had been cut from the stone by a machine. The paths were all roughly twenty feet across, and the same thin, salty sand lay on the ground. The mist, that covered everywhere, made the entrances even more foreboding.

I saw where the zombie trail continued into The Warrens before we even reached it. It wasn't hard to spot. A path that was maybe ten feet across, that looked like it had been worn away over many years, by thousands of pairs of feet, stretched across the plain and entered the tunnel nearest to us. There were no zombies in sight, but I didn't like how deeply cut into the ground the trail was.

"I'm hoping that we won't be using that path?" I said, pointing at the trail.

"Unfortunately we will. We have to follow the same path at least most of the way. I think we might get lost otherwise."

But something we both noticed almost at the same time changed that.

A short distance from the entrance, a bicycle track crossed the zombie trail, and led into the third tunnel. I looked closer. The track seemed as though it had been used a lot of times.

"We never went that way," said Rudy.

"Do you think Adler found another route?" I asked.

"He must have, but he never mentioned it."

I was still nervous going in there. No open ground and not a lot of choices when it came to escaping if we came across anything, but DogThing wasn't growling and didn't seem disturbed, so I followed Rudy into the third entrance.

I was expecting hours of wandering around, lost, but about an hour later, after following the bicycle trail, we were looking down into a gulley that ended in a sheer wall. The tracks led down to the very bottom, where another metal door was built into the rock.

A door that was open.

We looked at each other, puzzled.

Leaning against the rock only a few feet away from the open door was an old, rusty bicycle.

"The professor's bicycle," said Rudy, as we approached the door.

There was no light coming from inside, just pitch darkness. Rudy knelt down next to the bicycle and tried to wipe away some of the dust and sand that had gathered on it. His hand went straight through.

"Well I guess that answers where he went."

"Yes, I suppose it does, almost."

"He must have come here a lot if all these footprints are anything to go by," I replied, indicating all of the different footprint trails coming to and from the entrance.

Most of them came from the path opposite the one we had arrived by.

Why so many visits?

I moved the bicycle away from the wall. Years of gathered dust and sand fell from it. It had been here so long that both the chain and the steering column had seized up. The bicycle may have been ancient even back when the professor had used it, so the cracked paint and rust weren't much of a gauge to go by.

Rudy stood there, peering at the doorway. I could see he was reluctant to go inside.

"I don't know whether I want to see what's in there."

I nodded my understanding.

"It's ok. I'll go."

"No. No. I'll go first, safety and all that. It makes sense. Just give me a moment."

I took my time lighting up one of my newly made chair leg torches and waited quietly by the door. I knew the torch wouldn't last as long as the others. I'd had no cloth to wrap round the top, and no petrol to soak it in; ironic really, since I'd probably burned thousands of gallons of fuel in the swamp fire. It didn't matter though; this was Rudy's friend we were expecting to find dead inside the door, unless it led somewhere else. I was hoping it did.

After a minute or so, Rudy stepped through the doorway; his own glow filled the corridor that was revealed, casting dim shadows over the broken furniture that littered the ground and the cobwebs that hung from the ceiling. I thought that was a bit odd, having not seen a single spider the entire time I had been here.

DogThing didn't follow us in, but he also didn't seem on edge.

There were three doors along the left side of the corridor, all of which were open, and then a dead end with another door in it that was shut. The door at the end looked almost identical to the door in the cave near the shack.

Rudy was standing in the corridor, not moving, so I decided it was down to me to look after all.

The first room was no larger than a decent sized bedroom, containing little apart from a row of turned-over filing cabinets, all of which were empty. More cobwebs filled the dark corners of the room, and the floor was littered with rotten books and piles of folders. I picked up the nearest folder and opened it, but the pages inside crumbled to dust in my hands.

The second room along was the same except the cabinets, again empty, were still standing against the far wall. There was also a stack of tables and chairs in one corner.

We found him in the last room, sitting upright facing an aged computer screen that was still plugged into the wall. Where the hell the electricity had come from originally I don't know; the plug was hanging by one rusted wire that clung to the concrete wall. The screen of the computer had been broken in a long time ago.

Adler had been dead for a long time. So long that there wasn't a shred of flesh left on him, just a decaying skeleton inside a smart, grey dress suit. There was a hat sitting on the side of the computer desk, caked in years of dust and grime. Yet more cobwebs covered the walls, the desk, and Adler.

Rudy recognised the hat and suit immediately, walked over to the body, and knelt down with his head bowed.

I didn't need to ask, but I did anyway.

"It's him isn't it?"

Rudy nodded.

"I'm really sorry Rudy." It was all I could think of to say.

After a few minutes Rudy stood and began searching the room. I joined him. I couldn't think of anything else to say that might make Rudy feel any better, so I got on with the task, finding the compass, the key.

I was about to open the front of Adler's suit jacket, hoping to find the key dangling on a necklace round his neck, when the apparition came through the wall. A second before it appeared I heard DogThing growling down the corridor. I felt a tingling sensation run down the back of my neck and then it was there, right in front of me.

I have never been so terrified in my life. I've probably said that a few times since starting this journal, and meant it each time, but this was the kind of fear that made me run for my life, Rudy as well.

It came out of the wall screaming, a high-pitched screech that was ear-piercing. I couldn't understand anything that it was babbling at me, apart from "GET AWAY". It was vaguely human, or at least I thought it could be if it wasn't flailing itself in a way that made it too blurry to see. Its eyes burned with hate and madness.

So I ran, as fast as I could, tripping twice as I dashed out of the room, down the passageway and out of the door, to the sloped opening that led up to The Warrens. It was right at my back the whole way; only I couldn't feel its touch, just the coldness that swept around me as it flailed its arms trying to grab hold of me.

Without watching where I was going, I sprinted up the slope back towards The Warrens, straight past the two zombies that were making their way along the path towards us. I briefly stumbled sideways to avoid them and saw Rudy do the same.

Then the most god-awful noise pierced the air. I stumbled again and fell forwards, landing on my back. I felt one of the blades hanging at my side nearly pierce my leg, and rolled over onto my back.

About twenty feet away the apparition had stopped. It was no longer chasing us. Instead it was busy tearing apart the two zombies. It was over in seconds. The zombies lurched away from it, fearful like I was. They know fear? It didn't matter. The glowing, screaming apparition tore them both apart like they were made of paper.

DogThing had been busy during all of this. As I got back up to my feet I could see him backing away from the apparition, leaving the remains of the other zombie on the ground. I didn't notice until afterwards that DogThing had killed three other zombies, leaving only the two standing as we came rushing out of the door.

The apparition stopped screaming and flailing, and walked towards us, halting about ten feet away. It tried to move forward again, but appeared to be blocked in some way. It stood there watching us. I was stunned, completely unable to decide what to do.

"Adler?" asked Rudy.

The apparition looked up, and stared at Rudy.

"Do I know you, thief?" it said, its voice harsh and angry.

"Yes. It's me John. It's Rudy. Don't you remember me?"

"Rudy. That does sound familiar. Were we friends once?"

Rudy glanced at me, worriedly.

"Yes, for many years. You don't remember?"

"Of course I remember you, you old fool. But you are dead. I saw you dead. You are gone. You are no more alive than those pathetic creatures."

"Yes. I'm dead. Sort of."

"Stop talking to me. You can't be here. You died."

I stayed quiet during all of this, and took out my blades, watching the two paths for more zombies. They had followed us, surely?

"Just as you did," said Rudy.

"What? How ridiculous. I'm not dead."

"But you are. Like me. You are...a ghost."

"Maybe so, but you are a thief, Rudy Shevchenko, and there is no excuse for such rude behaviour."

"But...how? I haven't taken anything."

Adler glared at him.

"You know what you were going to take though, don't you? Well no one shall have it. I will not allow that...creature to find them again."

"We don't want CutterJack to..."

"Don't say its name! Damn you, you fool! Don't you know it can hear you?"

"It can?"

"Yes. Everywhere you go. Anything you say. It can hear the living. It can read their thoughts and know what they are planning; hear their breathing, their heartbeat, everything."

My turn to cut in.

"So that's how the zombies are finding us?"

Adler turned and glared at me this time.

"Yes boy. It knows exactly what you are planning, and now it knows what you are searching for."

"But you led us to look for them. Your diary."

"My diary. I was a fool, forever searching for them only, trying to keep it secret and hoping for a way to escape this hell of a place. My foolishness and my hurry caused my end."

Adler turned and walked back down to the door. We followed, but with every step I was wary of him turning on us again. I looked to DogThing, hoping to get some indication of any danger, but he was just sitting there a few feet from the entrance.

Adler was standing staring at his own skeleton when I stepped into the room. He looked up briefly.

Rudy was bursting with questions.

"How did you find the door? You never mentioned it."

"I didn't find it while you were still alive, Rudy. It was long after. I used the paths through The Warrens a lot after you died. I can't be completely sure of it, but right after I found you dead, I travelled across the plateau. He was there, it was there. I sensed him, but could not see him. He knew where I was. So after that I took to using the paths through The Warrens, hiding whenever his creations wandered past. Every time I tried to get to the trash yard, or to the bus, I could sense him. I could feel that he was there. That fear stopped me from trying to leave for weeks."

"Zombies," said Rudy.

"Pardon?"

"They're called zombies. His creatures."

"They are? Oh. Interesting. Finally a name to the abominations. Anyway, as I was saying, I used the route through The Warrens a lot, trying to find a way through that felt safe. Then one day I came upon a set of tracks that hadn't been there before, along one of the paths that the...zombies didn't use. There were many tracks. So I followed them, and found myself outside this place."

Adler sat down on the desk next to his skeleton.

"The entrance was closed when I got here, but the footprints led straight to it, and I knew they were not old, otherwise I would have seen them before. I set up camp in the rocks above the path, and waited for days. Nothing. So I travelled again, back to the swamp, to gather provisions. How I hated those pod things, but not as much as mushrooms."

"You never did take to the cuisine here," said Rudy, laughing.

Adler shot him a sour look.

"Don't. Don't call it cuisine. The filth that grows here is anything but that."

Adler sighed.

"Well when I came back here, hoping maybe to try and open it again on my way to collect the keys. I was too hasty. The door was already open you see. I went in too quickly, didn't think. I was so excited, like a little boy walking into a toyshop. The door was open, and I could hear movement, voices."

"What happened?"

"They shot me."

"Shot you? Who?"

"I never found out who they were. They were armed with guns, strange guns, the likes of which I had never seen before. Their clothing, it was like something out of the future, or the past, grey armour of some kind. The door at the back was open too. I think they were leaving. The last of them turned round, and as I was calling out in welcome he levelled his weapon at me and fired. That is all I can remember. I suppose I must have dragged myself back to this room, and sat down somehow."

"That's terrible. They didn't even stop to find out who you were?"

"No. I think they presumed I was a zombie."

"You found the fourth compass though?"

"Yes. It was up near the other entrance, outside the door. That creature must have killed someone up there. What I don't understand is why the body was buried. It would never have buried the man. Someone else must have buried it."

"The armoured people?"

"Maybe."

"You've seen outside? You saw it when they had the door open?"

The professor laughed at this.

"Oh Rudy! You've been like that, like this, longer than I have and you haven't figured some things out. Walls are no barrier to you now, my friend."

"Yes, I do know, but..."

"Rudy, I have been sitting outside in the sun for years now."

"Outside in the sun?"

"Yes, come. Come with me now."

We went out into the passage and the professor walked towards the door at the back. He didn't stop, just went right through the door. It puzzled me. Why hadn't he walked through the wall in the room if there were no barriers, instead of going into the corridor? Habit?

"Come on my old friend. Come and see the world outside of our dark prison."

Rudy looked at me for a moment.

"I will come back."

Then he stepped through the door.

I knelt down and peered through the gap underneath. It was almost exactly like the other door. The gap was no more than a few inches.

I saw it.

The fourth compass.

It was a few feet away, lying on the rock floor. If I could reach it, all that would remain was the one in the safe.

They came back through the door a few minutes later. Rudy looked different, and not in a healthy way. He looked sad.

My turn for the questions.

"What's out there?"

Rudy shook his head.

"Only endless desert. I hoped for something else, but at least I've seen the sun for the first time in years."

"The key, it's out there, outside," I said.



"Yes, again, I don't know how or when I put it there, or if it was even me. The first thing I remember after the pain of the shot was waking up, sitting outside in the sun."

"So barren," said Rudy. "So desolate. I'd hoped that London was outside the door, or at least somewhere familiar."

"Ah but we are not somewhere familiar are we, my old friend? This is not Earth. I figured that out a long time ago. But at least the sun shines out there."

I wished I could have seen the sun again.

It took me at least an hour to get the compass. I pulled apart bits of furniture and tried poking it through the gap. Eventually I managed to drag the damn thing back within reaching distance. I could hear the two of them talking in the room with the computer, but wasn't paying attention. I probably should have been; no doubt Adler had a lot of things to say that would be important.

Adler was bound to the compass, just as Rudy was. He couldn't explain how. He had numerous ideas about trapped souls and their spirits having nowhere to go. Most of his ideas seemed like fairy tales to me. Are ghosts magnetic? Compasses don't draw things to them, do they? Surely it should have been the other way round?

We left quickly.

I took the professor's hat. He insisted I keep hold of that. Not sure why, it wasn't like he was ever going to be able to wear it again. There was also a small rucksack full of his stuff. I turned it upside down and left the contents on the floor. There was nothing useful, but it was a stroke of luck to have something to put my things in again.

One thing that was handy, though. There was a small bottle filled with oil of some kind. Adler was reluctant to leave the bicycle behind, and finally convinced me to use some of the oil on it and push it along at least for a while. I agreed, even though I didn't think there was any point. It seems that I was wrong. After a few hundred yards, most of the dust and crap that had built up simply broke off, and the wheels and chain were turning again. I still wasn't quite ready to try riding it.

Further into The Warrens was where Adler took us, all the time chattering away. It was nice to see Rudy full of spirit again. By the way he was going on I even thought he was raring for our next encounter with the zombies. I guess I'll never understand that bit, being potential zombie food myself, but I figured that being dead didn't give you too many perks, so I couldn't begrudge his enthusiasm at discovering that he was an untouchable zombie-killer. When I think about it, it was handy. I could sleep knowing that I had a demon guard dog and two ghosts that never needed to sleep, watching over me, all three of which were utterly deadly as far as zombies were concerned.

Adler hadn't figured out why he was so lethal to zombies.

"I don't even feel them," he said. "There were a few of them, loitering around outside the door when I first became aware that I was still here. I was confused, staring down at my own body as it died. I walked outside, and in my frustration I tried to attack the nearest one. I don't know how or why it works, but it does. They can't touch me, but I can destroy them. I don't physically tear them apart. They sort of just fall apart at the seams."

We found a small alcove further into The Warrens a few hours later. It was only a short climb, up some rocks. Adler said he'd used it several times. The zombies couldn't get up there.

Only one more compass to get now, and thankfully Adler told us where the key to the safe was hidden.

I laughed until I was almost in tears when he told me. Talk about irony. It was one of the keys hanging in the ignition of the bus.

### **Day 37**

Is it really thirty seven days since I got here?

Every time I write the day in this journal now it seems like an eternity. I feel like I've been here much longer, which worries me. What if I end up stuck here for years, like Rudy and Adler?

That's not the plan, I know. If I get out of here and I take the compasses with me, hopefully my ghost friends will go with me. What happens to them wherever we end up next, I don't know. I don't think either of them cares, so long as it isn't an eternity stuck in this place.

We spent nearly the entire day heading through The Warrens, and I camped out again in another nook up in the rocks. The trail was easy to follow and I wouldn't have needed directions. The footprints and bicycle trail left in the dirt, long ago, by Adler, seemed quite permanent, which wasn't promising as far as water was concerned. I didn't have many bottles left.

The entrance to The Warrens came out not far from where I'd first stepped up onto the plateau. About half a mile of walking across the open rocky ground and I saw the rocks that lined the bottom of the slope. I was missing the glowing grass already.

DogThing went all hyper as soon as we left The Warrens. I guessed that we were back on his home ground now, barely a mile through the mushrooms to reach the bus. You know I don't think Adler and Rudy stopped talking even once during the whole time. You would have thought they were two old friends, still alive, and just out for a walk in the park somewhere, instead of two ghosts.

We stopped at the foot of the slope. Adler was paranoid about CutterJack being around, even though it had been years since he had been here.

"I don't think he is here. At least I can't sense him, like I could before, but that doesn't mean we should be rash. He could be anywhere, waiting."

"Or he could be back at his home, wherever that is, still licking his wound."

Adler laughed.

"Yes. True. How did you manage that? I still can't get my mind around it. You actually injured it."

"Luck and clumsiness," I replied. "I wouldn't have stood a chance if Rudy hadn't come running through the door at that moment."

"Plus I think the Maw had given him one hell of a battering before he got to the door," said Rudy. "He could quite probably have already been injured."

"Yes," said Adler, "he is wary of the Maw, and rightfully so, I have seen first-hand what they are capable of. Well, so have you."

I looked over at DogThing and wondered again why such a creature had decided to become my friend.

I picked up the pace a bit, and soon we were walking through mushrooms again, following the marker poles. I had too many questions for Adler; so many that I couldn't remember half of them.

"Did you ever find out who put these markers here?"

"No, though I did repair a few that had fallen down. They are old, I know that much. I can only suspect that this place has had people coming through it for a long time. Well, there is evidence all around us is there not? The junk yard, The City, buildings dotted all over the place that have been run down for what might be centuries. It has puzzled me for years - were they made here? Or are they like other things, brought here by some mysterious occurrence?"

"I think they were brought here," I replied. "It's all too random. Take The City, for example - it just starts; there is no reason for the roads to be where they are, it's almost like they were once attached to other roads, and still should be, but a chunk of it was picked up and dumped right there."

Adler was nodding. "Exactly my point."

"Even some of the roads are broken up where a rock underneath has pushed them up. Rock doesn't do that, does it? Tree roots I can understand, but a rock pushing its way up through the road? Seems too odd to me."

"Yes, indeed, and the building on the edge of the swamp. Have you noticed that they are sitting on top of a sandbank? I looked. In one of the cellars the walls have collapsed and sand has poured in. Who builds foundations into sand when there is solid rock only a few feet away?"

We camped out in pretty much exactly the same spot that DogThing and I had used on our trek through the mushroom field the first time, underneath the giant mushrooms. I'm almost certain that I slept under the same one. It seems so long since we made that journey, like it was years ago. It's hard to believe that it has only been a few weeks.

### **Day 38**

The weirdest thing happened. I awoke hours later, having had another dream, the first in days. Adler and Rudy were sitting over near the marker pole, a few yards away. DogThing was underneath one of the mushrooms. He was sleeping, I think, though I don't know if he ever really sleeps the way people do. It started raining again. Just like that. One moment ominous silence, and the next moment there was torrential rain, just as it had been the last time we passed this way. Yes, last time it had been drizzling for a day or so before, but the torrential downpour had happened while we had been under the mushrooms.

In the dream I was walking round a house. It was not a place that I had been to before, though it seemed familiar somehow. There was no furniture in any of the rooms, like it had been cleaned out before a sale. The walls in every room were painted white and there were no curtains at the windows.

I happened to glance out of one of the windows on the top floor, and saw that there was scaffolding everywhere. The oddest thing. I went downstairs to find the front door, so that I could go outside, but there was no front door. I walked all the way round the ground floor of the house and there were no doors leading outside.

There were three floors to the house, and the front door was at the top. There was only one large room up there, and in that room, tucked into the corner, was a small dressing table with a mirror. Someone was sitting on the chair, facing the mirror. I spoke, but there was no answer. Then I found out why.

The person in the chair was dead, and had been for a long time. I stood there, puzzled for a while, and then I recognised the dead man's clothing.

It was me.

That was when I woke up.

I didn't get back to sleep. The noise from the rain was so loud. I lay there for a while, drifting in and out, but didn't manage to drop off again. I think I may have been drifting into a deep sleep when all hell broke loose.

They even took DogThing by surprise, but he was up and tearing into them before I was even fully conscious and aware of what was going on.

Adler and Rudy ran past me as I stumbled and tried to find my blades. My blades? They had somehow become mine now, no longer stolen from CutterJack.

It must have been the rain that obscured their sound, or their smell in DogThing's case. It had to be that. He normally sensed zombies approaching before they were anywhere near us, and it wasn't like it was just one or two, stumbling slowly through the mushrooms. There were hundreds.

Adrenalin finally kicked in and I was up, throwing my rucksack over my shoulders. With a blade in each hand I ran towards where the others were now furiously battling the mass of zombies. I slowed down as I got nearer and made my way closer to DogThing. Unlike Rudy and Adler, who were now running through the horde, throwing themselves about and knocking down zombies every few steps, I was not going to get trapped in among them.

The first one that got past DogThing and came shuffling towards me was the nastiest I had seen yet. How the thing managed to stay held together I don't know. CutterJack must have been in a particularly cruel mood when he created this one. Instead of legs, it walked on six hands, all of which were attached to the back of the first poor soul. On top of this were two other torsos, each with a head and no arms. Where the legs had gone I don't know.

I stepped backwards and waited for it to get closer, pulled back both of my blades and swung the first, then the second. All three heads screamed at me furiously and it tried to grab my legs, toppling itself over in the process. I was nearly sick, but still managed to get in two more stabs before I backed off and saw the thing writhe on the floor for a moment. It reached out one hand in my direction, before finally collapsing.

There were too many. It didn't matter how many DogThing, Adler and Rudy were killing, more were appearing to take their place. But as much as I shouted, Adler and Rudy carried on. DogThing took notice of me though, and was following me as I slowly backed away.

Then without warning Adler stopped fighting. He was looking around. I think he was trying to find Rudy, but spotted me first.

"Get out of here," shouted Adler. "Get to the bus, lock yourself in! They can't hurt us!"

I ran for Adler's bicycle and leapt onto it, hoping to God that it wouldn't fall apart on me. The last time I had ridden a bicycle I had been about twelve years old, so the first thing I did was fall off it. Ten yards was how far I got, and then crash, straight into one of the larger mushrooms.

DogThing tore into a zombie a few feet away, and I hauled myself back onto the bicycle and pushed off as another zombie reached out to grab me.

Then I was away, riding as fast as I could through the mushrooms, on a bicycle that I thought would fall apart at any moment. But it didn't. I reached another marker and then slowed down, stopping for breath.

Adler and Rudy were standing about a hundred feet away, facing in the direction that we had come. Of course, I'd somehow forgotten that my leaving would drag them away from the fight.

DogThing padded over and sat down a few yards away, panting.

The break was short-lived as a single zombie staggered into view, and then another. These ones were moving faster than normal. I don't know why. Maybe CutterJack's experiments had yielded better results with these few.

DogThing turned and growled at them.

"No, leave them," I said, and started cycling away again. Thankfully DogThing did leave them. I think Rudy and Adler would quite happily have dealt with them, but I wanted the hell out of there.

I didn't ride as fast this time. DogThing could move damn fast when he wanted to, so that wasn't a problem. But I was losing my sense of direction. Thankfully Rudy spotted another marker and we picked up the pace again, forced onwards by the presence of the zombies that would appear through the mist every time I slowed down.

After an hour of this I was beginning to tire. My legs were screaming at me. I'd forgotten how much work riding a bicycle was. I protested when Rudy ordered me to stop and rest for a few minutes, but I couldn't really argue. Although I had become a little more resilient after living here for over a month, I was still no athlete, and this was pushing it. We'd reached the junkyard at last, or at least the start of it, and I collapsed next to the first pile of junk that I saw. I smiled; a few yards was the familiar pile of bicycles and prams that I had built, which meant we weren't far from the bus.

We'd left the zombies behind, even the faster ones, so I walked, leaning on the bicycle. I know it would have been much easier to ride if the ground hadn't been so uneven and muddy, plus my legs felt like jelly.

A while later we reached the bus. The relief of seeing it looming in the darkness was short lived though.

Something had been waiting for us.

There, sitting on its haunches at the back of the bus, was a creature I had not seen before, but I knew what it was immediately. The grey, lizard-like skin was stretched taut over its powerful frame. It was larger than DogThing, much larger, and as close to a cross between a panther and a crocodile as you could get.

I stopped in my tracks, dropped the bicycle and reached for my blades as it stood up and stretched its legs casually. DogThing growled and the creature answered with a hiss.

So this was the mysterious species that had been killed in the storeroom at the back of the shop. That meant it was killable, but it didn't help much when it was bounding towards me, its massive jaw opening to reveal rows of teeth that would make a shark envious. DogThing leapt at its throat, but the creature reared up and batted him aside with one of its massive paws, sending him hurtling away over a pile of junk to disappear into the darkness with a crash.

I stood my ground, crouching, hoping desperately that somehow these two blades would be enough to hurt the creature.

Adler and Rudy ran past me, charging at it, but they fell straight through it. This was no unliving abomination that could be hurt by ghosts. Their attempt did slow it down though, but only for a moment.

It jumped at me and I lashed out in return, feeling the flat of the blade hit its skin and deflect off as I was thrown to the floor. Then it was on me, one massive paw pushed against my chest, crushing my ribs; it looked down at me and bared its teeth.

But it just stayed there.

Why hadn't it killed me?

Then I heard the footsteps behind me and saw a long pale hand pick up the blade that lay on the floor next to me.

"I told you I would find you, little rat."

As CutterJack stood over me, I saw his face for the first time. If I thought that the zombies were hideous, they were nothing compared to what stared back at me out of that hood.

I knew at that moment that CutterJack was no human, and never had been. He was too alien, too grotesque to have even been one of his own experiments. Everything about his face said *death*. His skin was pale, almost transparent, and a mass of scars, though there were no veins visible underneath. His features were twisted, as though they had been carved up, and sewn back together many times. He had only one visible eye, blackened and bloodshot. The other was sewn over, crossed by a stitched scar that ran from his pointed chin to the top of his forehead, but no surgeon had made these stitches. Instead, metal staples stuck out every inch or so along the opening, and between them, I could see the grey bone of his skull, cracked and rotten where the staples had been forced in. The skin around his mouth was drawn back, and taut, showing rows of sharpened, bloody teeth. Where his nose should have been, there was just a gaping hole, split by a small, sharp sliver of bone.

My senses were assaulted by a rank, musty stench that somehow spoke to me of death that was far older than anything I had ever known. There was something in

those eyes that I will remember, always; a malevolence that hated not only what it was seeing, but possibly everything living that had ever existed.

This was the creature that now stood over me, his pet pinning me to the ground with a force that I was unable to resist. He was even taller than I had first thought, easily over eight feet in height, probably closer to nine. His body was thin and gaunt, like a ragged skeleton over which the darkest, dirtiest clothing was hung. He leaned closer to me, so that his face was barely inches from mine, stared me straight in the face, and smiled. There was no warmth in that smile. It was a smile of victory, the kind that only the most wicked of hunters saves for taunting his helpless victims, before ending them.

I wondered if that was what I was about to become, and whether it would last very long. Was I about to become a plaything, a toy to torture? Was my fate the same as all those countless abominations that walked the dark mists of this place? Part of me longed at that moment for it to all be over. Do with me as you please, I thought. I have had enough of running now.

"Be still," he hissed. I did as I was told, but then I realised he wasn't talking to me. He was commanding the lizard creature (a lizardcat?) that had me pinned to the ground. It lifted its paw off my chest, but still bared its razor-sharp metallic teeth at me. I coughed and drew a sharp breath in.

Then CutterJack's attention was on me again.

"I think you have something that is mine, little rat," he rasped, his voice rattling like his lungs were filled with water, or with blood.

He reached down and pulled at my shirt, searching for the compasses that had slipped and now dug into my back. But then he stopped and stood up, suddenly distracted. His smug grin vanished, replaced by suspicion, his one eye squinting as he looked around. Something had disturbed him, something I couldn't sense.

"Give me the keys, quickly or I will end you," he said, pointing the blade at my chest. There was urgency in his voice now, and I felt the blade pierce my skin. I gritted my teeth against the pain as I felt a warm trickle of blood run across my ribs, and down my side. It took every bit of will that I could muster to not breathe in, and force myself to lie still. It was the only way I could avoid being impaled on the blade.

The lizardcat whined and growled, scanning around frantically. It began to back away from us. I heard an answering hiss from over near the bus, and my heart sank as at least a dozen more lizardcats bounded round the corner, spreading out in a circle around us, hissing and spitting as they glared into the darkness. Something was coming. They could sense it, CutterJack could sense it, and now even I could feel the change in the air.

CutterJack pulled his blade back, but still kept it aimed at me. He glanced around again, shifting irritably as the lizardcats around us shuffled and twitched, peering in every direction.

He looked down at me.

"Rat. Give me the key, now!" he shouted, but then he suddenly looked away, dropped into a crouch, and lifted his blade up in defence.

Whatever it was that was coming, was coming right now, and I didn't want to see the thing that could scare CutterJack and his lizards.

A flash of fur rocketed across the gap between us and the nearest junk pile. It moved at a speed that made my heart leap. The Maw shot through the gap between two of the lizardcats before either of them could even react, instead they moved moments after it passed, snapping at an empty space, as the Maw went directly for CutterJack, leaping high, and straight at his throat. But this time CutterJack was fast, and ducked down just in time, swinging his blade quicker than my eyes could even follow. The Maw went hurtling by, to latch on to one of the lizardcats with its teeth. I heard a ripping noise as it tore a massive gouge in the creature's back as it went by. The lizardcat stumbled, and spun around, lashing out with its claws and screeching in anger, but the Maw was gone, speeding off into the darkness, lost from view in the mist. I had only the briefest of glances at it before it vanished, but I knew that neither blade nor claw had touched it.

My heart began to beat faster. Hope. That was all I could think of. If a Maw was willing to risk its life to try and help me, then there had to be a chance, even the slightest chance that I could escape, and I owed it at least an attempt.

Another flash of fur, this time from a different direction, and another lizardcat screeched as it was struck.

Then another

And another.

There was more than one Maw, maybe many. I had no real way of knowing. They appeared, struck, and were gone before I could make out any discerning features.

Again and again the Maw made attacks upon CutterJack's pets, disappearing a moment later, back into the mist, before any of my captors could react. The lizardcats flew into a rage as one after another they were bowled over and mauled. They shifted around, confused and seemingly dazed, helpless to stop the attacks, and even snapping at each other.

I looked up at CutterJack. His attention was not on me. I knew then that he didn't even consider me to be a threat, and I knew that I would only have this one chance.

Now was the time, if ever there was going to be one.

If I tried to escape, tried to run out of this circle of my enemies, then I would probably die, but that didn't mean I was going to lie there and hope that the Maw would rescue me. In one desperate last attempt to stay alive, I took a deep breath and lashed out, kicking CutterJack in the leg, hoping that it was his injured one. I gave it everything I had, even though my own legs were still weak from riding the bicycle, and my whole body fought against it. I struck him, and I knew it was hard.

*Thud.*

I was lucky. He howled and stumbled away, hobbling for a moment before spitting at me and pulling his blade back, ready to strike. He advanced again, jumping forward, but his injured leg faltered.

I was ready, stumbling to my feet and grabbing the other blade, which had been underneath me the whole time. I lashed out at him, but missed as he stepped back so that the blade cut through empty space.



We were both up now, facing each other, barely ten feet apart. How I ever believed, for even the briefest of moments, that I could stand there and actually fight him, I don't know, but there was something waking up inside me, and it said that I could do it. I would keep him at bay if he came at me. I would fight him off long enough for the Maw to decimate his pets.

CutterJack stared at me, warily watching the blade in my hand. Then Adler and Rudy were by my side, yelling and screaming at him. I knew they couldn't help me, but did CutterJack know that? It seemed not. He backed away and looked around at the chaos.

The first lizardcat, the one that had first knocked me down, jumped out of the way, glaring at the ghosts warily. They hadn't scared it the first time, but I guessed that it had never seen its master show any sign of weakness. It started to back away.

"Get back here," CutterJack cursed, but the lizardcat still backed away even further, edging towards the bus.

*"Stay calm. Hold your ground. Don't back away. "*

The voice in my head was back again.

Then I saw CutterJack's one eye open wide. He was staring straight at me... No, not at me, and not at my ghost friends. Something else. Something that was behind me.

Then he was backing off, moving quickly past the bus, taking off at a run. His lizard pets broke away from their guard and bounded along to catch up with him.

I didn't understand; even with the help of the few Maw that were hounding them, I would quite probably be dead if he had decided to come for me.

"This is not over, rat," CutterJack yelled as he vanished from view into the junkyard.

Then I heard the growls behind me, and turned round to see what he had seen before he fled, what it was that had frightened even this most deadly of monsters.

CutterJack had not been the only one waiting for me at the junkyard.

The Maw had arrived, and I don't mean the few that had caused disarray with the lizardcats. There were scores, maybe even hundreds. So many that I wouldn't even try to count them. They jumped over the piles of junk and poured in from the mists around us. At their lead, a few feet away, was my DogThing, a little shaken, but still fighting fit. Several of them broke off from the main group and sped past me at an astonishing speed. I could tell that they were the ones who had made the attacks earlier. They were different to the Maw I had seen so far, different to DogThing. These Maw were larger, quicker, deadlier, their fur almost black, and their eyes even larger than DogThing's. They vanished a moment later into the mists, in the same direction that CutterJack and his pets had gone.

I collapsed on the floor, dropping my blade and holding my chest. The lizardcat had nearly crushed me. My chest was tight with pain, and I found it difficult to breathe without it hurting. Broken ribs maybe. I reached inside my shirt to where the wound was, and was relieved to find that it was only the slightest of cuts. It would need cleaning, somehow, but if I didn't let it get dirty and infected, it should heal.

"Are you injured?"

It was Adler, leaning down over me.

"I'm ok. I'll be ok." I was gasping for breath. "I just need a moment. My ribs feel like a car rammed into me."

After a few minutes, I got up slowly and headed over to the bus. Around me, the Maw were spreading out, surrounding the whole area. Far away, back towards the mushrooms the noise of a furious fight drifted towards us, the screams of zombies mixed with the growling and barks of the Maw. I could hear howling from the junkyard, where I imagined the Maw were prowling and hunting, seeking out CutterJack and his pets. I had a sense that they had not caught him.

A war was raging around me, and how different this place seemed to when I had first been here those many days ago. It had been so quiet, so barren and void of life, and now, all around me, the noise of fighting. I couldn't help but feel that, in little more than a month, I had turned this surreal chaotic world into even more chaos.

I stumbled onto the bus and leaned over into the driver's cab. The keys were still in the ignition, which surprised me.

"It's that one," said Adler, pointing to a small, bronze key dangling on the loop among a dozen other keys. I pulled them out of the ignition, deciding that it might be better to take them all in case the others had a use.

I was confused.

"Adler, you said you thought he could hear all of our thoughts, and know what we were planning? Well how come this key is still here if he knows what it opens? Surely he would have read that from my mind?"

Adler was nodding.

"Yes, I believed it was so. But this does suggest that maybe he isn't quite as omniscient as I thought. I was rather confused when we first met. It had been so long since I'd seen anyone else."

"Then he may not know everything."

"Indeed. This is good news, is it not?"

"Yes, of course. If he had known that the safe key was here, it wouldn't be here any more, and he would already have the safe open, and the last key would be his."

"Which means that, unless he has managed to break open the safe, the last compass should still be there."

"Let's go." I stepped out of the bus, grabbed my bag, and started hobbling off towards the junkyard.

"Are you leaving the bicycle?" asked Adler.

I'd forgotten about it, but was glad that Adler hadn't. It made a usable crutch of sorts, taking some of my weight as I moved slowly along. There was no way I was going to ride it again, at least not for now, but I was able to hang my pack over it.

Rudy caught up with me. He looked concerned.

"You don't need to rest? That was quite a fight, and you took a battering."

"I'm good, and we are too close, plus we have the Maw with us now. We don't have time to mess around. Every minute or hour we give him means another ambush or

something worse. I can't let him have the time to plot."

"But there is no point if you collapse before we get there."

"I'll be fine."

In truth, I felt dizzy and sick, but I was determined to go on. Rudy was about to protest further, but Adler shook his head.

"James is right. We need to do this now, especially while he has the protection of the Maw."

Almost as though they knew what to do, the Maw broke off from their guard perimeter and split into packs, moving with us, patrolling down all of the different paths through the piles of junk that we passed. I couldn't believe how many of them there were. Hundreds it seemed. It was as though they had known that something important was about to happen, and had come from all over to be there. There were Maw of all sizes. This wasn't just a pack of fighting dogs; they had brought their young as well. On the edge of visibility, I saw a large group of the huge, black-furred ones, herding an even bigger pack of tiny Maw, some no bigger than a cat. I smiled at this. Maw puppies.

It was then that it clicked. I had never considered it before. I had always presumed that the Maw had come from here, that they were natives, and that they belonged here, like every other strange thing that I had encountered. But what if they weren't? What if they were the same as us, lost and trapped here? It seemed obvious to me now. They simply wanted to escape this place like we did. That had to be it. It explained so much. Why else would such creatures befriend me when there was so little for them to fear in this place? I always knew that there had to be a reason, and now, here they all were, gathered around me, probably the entire pack, going wherever it was that we were heading. Somehow they must have known that we were making a break for an exit, a way out, and they wanted out too.

Without the fear of bumping into zombies or CutterJack, we moved fast. I was in a lot of pain, but leaning on the bicycle helped. We soon arrived at my old camp. After over a month, here I was, right back where I had started.

There were already fresh zombie kills littering the area; the ground was covered in destroyed bodies, right where the safe poked out from the top of a junk pile. There were several dozen Maw lying around the place, licking their paws and scratching their fur, like DogThing always did after a fight with a zombie. I looked behind me. DogThing was still right there, a couple of feet away. He was sticking closer to me now than ever before.

"CutterJack knew something was here," said Adler. I frowned. It was strange to hear Adler say our enemy's name. I guess that the professor had thrown away the idea that his thoughts were being read.

"Or he knew that James had been here," said Rudy.

"Ah, yes, well thought of, Rudy. It makes perfect sense for him to cover every possibility."

I climbed up onto the junk and made my way over to where the safe still sat. Some of the Maw followed me, hopping across the piles of refuse, sniffing in the gaps and glaring into any spot that was dark or able to hide someone or something.

It was strange being back here again after so many days. The last time I was here I couldn't see a thing; my eyes hadn't adjusted to the dark back then, but now I could see clearly. The great wall loomed ahead, blocking all vision past it, and there, tucked away among the junk, was my old camp, the fire in the middle still piled with fresh logs.

I cringed as I looked over and saw that the car wreck was still there, untouched. A shiver went down my spine as I thought of what had been in the footwell, what still probably lay on the floor, the other side of the wall. I wonder if he ever got to Namibia.

The safe hadn't moved, and I could see now why I had thought it was strange, why I hadn't recognised it for what it was. The door was on the underside where I couldn't open it, where I would never have seen it when I first arrived. I would need to turn it over.

I leaned on it for a moment, waiting for the pain in my chest to stop. I nearly laughed. How ironic that when I return here I'm not in a much better state than when I first arrived.

As I was propping myself up on the safe, I happened to glance down. Something metallic was lying on the floor a few feet away, tucked underneath a broken kitchen table. I crouched down, reached into the gap, and plucked it from among the broken glass.

It was my mobile phone.

The first thing I tried was switching it on, like it would have been any use. Of course, there was nothing. The battery must have run down. I looked at it puzzled, it was my phone, sure enough, but somehow it was wrong. I couldn't place why.

Adler and Rudy were watching me the whole time.

"Find something?"

I smiled.

"My phone. I wondered where it had gone."

Adler frowned and peered at it.

"That is a telephone?" he said, shaking his head. "How things have changed in the decades I have been here."

We all stood frowning at the safe, puzzling over what to do with it.

"So how are we going to get that thing tipped over?" asked Rudy.

"Ah, yes." said Adler. "It seemed like a good idea at the time, turning it over."

"Hose pipe."

"Hose pipe?" asked Rudy.

I even remembered where I'd found it before. It wasn't far from the old camp, only a ten-minute walk. It did mean backtracking on ourselves a bit, I couldn't think of another way of moving the safe. All of this junk lying around and nothing looked useful for shifting it.

It took a while to haul the rest of it out from underneath all the trash and rubble. The last time I had been here, I had cut off a bit that was quite easy to get at. I didn't have that luxury this time. I couldn't move some of the rubble, but I managed to uncover

enough of the hose pipe to make a loop round the safe, and give me a few feet to pull on.

I was so relieved when it worked. After pulling and pulling for what seemed hours, I finally managed to topple the safe over onto one side. The noise was thunderous as it crashed through the piles of wood and broken glass, hitting the rock floor with a loud crack. Around me, the Maw were startled, and dropped into a crouch before they realised that there was no threat. I could have sworn DogThing was frowning at me.

I tried the key. It was stiff, but after I wriggled it around in the lock there was finally a satisfying clunk, and the door swung open. Piles of old papers and books spewed out, spilling across the ground. I rummaged around, feeling almost desperate as I got to the back of the safe, but it was there right at the back, stuffed inside a book. It was a copy of Adler's thesis.

"Always something that puzzled me, that," said Adler. "Of all the things in my house that could have travelled here with me, it was a box of copies of my thesis. They were due to be picked up and taken to Oxford University, after I had signed them. I kept finding them everywhere, all over, even in some of the houses in The City. It's so disheartening to know that they won't have been read."

I put the thesis in my pack.

"I'll keep this one for you, you never know, we may get back, and I can deliver it myself."

Adler laughed. "Only a few decades late."

I had all four compasses, each of them identical except for one small detail. They each had one of the four compass directions engraved upon them - north, south, east and west. Not one of the compasses moved any more when you turned them.

I held them up, each dangling on an identical chain.

"So, what do I do with these then?"

Rudy and Adler stood watching me.

"I have absolutely no idea," said Adler. "I know we have to find the way to The House That Was Never Built from the scaffolding, but once we are there we are walking blind. I must admit, I had hoped that something significant might happen when all of them were together. "

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't a clue, my friend."

"Let's go and find out then."

We set off across the junkyard once more, heading straight towards the scaffolding.

"What is The House That Was Never Built, Adler?"

"Ah, just a name for the strange structure that appears to not even be there. I am not sure. I am certain that it has something to do with the scaffolding. It is strange is it not? The scaffolding is there, like it surrounds a building, but there is no building; such a curious thing. Is it for another purpose I wonder? Did you ever go to the top?"

"No."

"You never went up to see? Even out of curiosity?"

"No, I didn't have time, I was too busy scavenging for food and water, too busy starving."

"Ah, that's a shame. If you had gone up there, you might have ventured far enough to see the door. It's quite odd, just sitting there in the middle of nowhere, no hole for a key or anything useful though."

"How does that make it a device?"

"It's not, not as I understand it anyway, but I believe the door is special in some way, that it may even be the device. I have not seen inside the door, if indeed it even goes inside anything. I read about it in a journal of sorts that I found in The City. It described what the person had found. Our nemesis also blurted some of his secrets once, while he was trying to get into the house on Merriwether Avenue, in between his curses. Beyond the door should be whatever he used to travel between places. How he did it, or how we use the keys, well, I don't know."

We passed the mountain of books that I remembered discovering on my expedition out from the first camp. Something had been rummaging in them since I was last here, or maybe there were simply more books, I couldn't be certain. It had been a reasonably neat, if not huge, pile. Now they were strewn all over the ground, like someone had been searching for something.

The Maw became fidgety as we approached the scaffolding site, and as we made our way round one of the massive junk hills, and the skeletal structure came into view, I found out why.

There were zombie bodies everywhere, or at least bits of them. I hadn't heard any fighting as we approached, so the Maw must have fought this battle long before we arrived. I trod carefully through the carnage, carefully keeping my distance in case one of them happened to still be moving.

I never had a proper look at the scaffolding the first time I came by this way, and certainly didn't notice that it led round in a spiral, all the way from the ground to maybe five, six or more levels high. I had an eerie feeling that I had been up there before, some kind of *déjà vu*, but I couldn't remember when or why. The memories were right there, hidden from me, screaming to pour out. There was something terribly familiar about all of it, and somehow I knew that there was something up that scaffolding that was waiting for me, something that had been waiting for me the whole time that I had been here.

There was only one way to find out.

It was on the third floor.

A door. Just a plain, wooden door, but until you stood facing it, you couldn't see it. A single step in both directions and it simply vanished from view. I reached out and pushed the door, but it didn't move. There was no handle to open it with.

I remembered the keys, and reached into my shirt and pulled them out.

Something was happening, something I hadn't expected. One moment there were four compasses hanging on chains round my neck, and the next there was only one. I panicked and searched. How could I have lost the other three? But something about the single compass in my hand was different. I looked closer and saw that all of the

four points on the compass were now showing on the one I held in my hand, and the compass was pointing directly ahead of me.

"How very curious," said Adler, as he peered over my shoulder.

"You were right. Something was supposed to happen," said Rudy.

I reached out to the door, feeling solid wood, and pushed. It simply swung open.

"Even more curious. It would never open for me," said Adler.

"The Key!" said Rudy, "I mean the compass. It was never whole before."

I hesitated for a moment. I hadn't told Adler or Rudy about the dream, about what I thought might be waiting for me in the room beyond the door. Was I going to die in the room beyond the door? Was I going to discover another grim scene of death?

I took a deep breath, and stepped across the short open space, into the room beyond, trying to ignore the sheer drop down below as I crossed. Directly ahead of me was what I had dreaded seeing. It was the dressing table with the mirror. But there was something different here, something that was not the same as the dream. The seat was there, in front of the table, but there was no one sitting in it, no dried and withered body. Had I been dreaming about the future? It wouldn't have been the first time. Was my death still to come from this room?

But there was no choice. I went over to the chair and sat down in front of the mirror, brushed aside the dust and the cobwebs that covered it, and stared directly at the face that was reflected back at me.

The face that wasn't mine.

He was much older than me, with dark curly hair that was lined with grey streaks; his face was weathered and tired, with bags under his eyes. He looked sick and pale, and sweat dripped from his face. He was dressed in some strange uniform, a bright white shirt, with a black jacket and grey trousers. There was a brightly coloured piece of cloth, with a picture of an eagle and a snake, tied around his neck that seemed to have no particular function.

"Who are you?"

I realised that we had both said the same words together.

"I'm James Halldon," we both replied, but then he looked confused.

"No," he said, "that's wrong. That's not me at all. I'm not James Halldon, but I thought I was."

I could see a change in his expression. The pallid colour was fading, and his skin began to flush, as though the blood in his body had only just remembered its job. I could feel my head throb for a moment, and then it was like someone had taken a heavy weight off the top of my head, one that I hadn't even noticed was there in the first place.

"I am James Halldon. But who are you?" I asked.

The man stared back at me, and then glanced around him. It was then that I saw that the room he was in was different as well. There were tiles upon the wall. It looked like one of the old toilet rooms that I had seen in the ruins occasionally, when my team had gone to the old city to scavenge for supplies, back when I was much younger.

What was I thinking? Scavenging? Old city? Team? These memories were new. Where had they come from? My mind raced.

The man in the mirror looked back at me.

"I'm where I started," he said, as though he was surprised to even be there.

"Where?"

"I thought I was trapped, in a dark place, with monsters and ghosts, but I'm not. I'm still in the toilet, at the service station. The mirror, with you in it, it's here. I'm not in the dark at all. It's you that is trapped. You. You were the face in the mirror that I saw before everything changed."

I didn't need to look behind to know that Adler and Rudy were standing there, watching over my shoulder. Whether they could see what I could see, hear what I could hear, I didn't know, but as the man in the mirror began to make sense of everything, so did I. With each memory that he recalled, another became clear to me. Many of the things that were in my head weren't true. They weren't my memories. They were his, this man who stared back at me from the mirror. One by one the memories broke down and faded away. At first, each of them was vivid, like I had been there, like I had lived them, but then they became fuzzy, memories that were faded after many years. Then finally they were gone, removed completely, not even forgotten, like they had never even been there.

He smokes a different brand of cigarette to me, Mayfair, and somehow the brand is important to him. I always smoked whatever I could find. Now it was all so clear. It was never me that was puzzled by the cigarettes, it was him.

"You've been stuck in my head."

It was a statement more than a question.

"Yes," he said, "I remember now. I walked into the toilet, and there was this mirror. It didn't look as though it belonged here. It's so old and cracked. I went to the toilet, and then I washed my hands, and then I looked into the mirror and you were looking back at me. I started to feel sick, dizzy, and then I was in the dark, and lost. I was hurt, like I had fallen or something, but it's not true is it? Was it a dream?"

"No. This isn't a dream, it's real, but you are there and I am here. Somehow, things got mixed up."

I remember now. I've looked into this mirror before. I was here before, but the first time I failed to do something, something I need to do, something that I came here to do. It was the mirror. I'd looked into it, and seen his face instead of my own. Something unexpected happened, and I stumbled, fell somewhere. Did I fall out of the door and off the scaffolding? That would explain my injuries. Did I bang my head? Was I merely confused? Somehow this stranger, this person from another world, had been in my head.

"I don't come from London. I've never even been to London. I don't even know where England is."

"I do. It's where I live," said the man.

"I'm not a salesman."



"I am," he replied, reaching down and picking up his briefcase, like that was significant somehow. He held on to the briefcase like it was precious.

"I never met a tramp on the bus did I?"

"No. That was me, when I was a child. I never knew his name, until now. He was called Rudy, but I have never met him again since."

"No, but I have."

"How did this happen?" he asked. "I just saw everything. I just spent the last God knows how many days in that place."

"I don't know. Somehow when we both looked into the mirror we got mixed up."

"I've been stuck in your head all this time, when in truth, I was standing right here in the toilet. How long have I been standing here?"

He looked at his mobile phone.

"Ten minutes," he said. "I have only been here for ten minutes."

I mirrored him, taking out the mobile phone I had found earlier. I shook my head, confused. I had no idea what this device was for. Earlier, when I had found it, I had known, but now it was only a dead gadget from a forgotten age, with no meaning to me.

The man in the mirror looked away. I don't know what he was looking at, but I could sense his relief, his joy at knowing that he was still alive, and free. As soon as he stepped out of that toilet door his life would be normal again.

Then he was gone, and I was staring at an empty toilet. Just like that, he left.

He didn't even say goodbye.

I stood up and turned to Adler and Rudy. I could tell by their shocked expressions that they had witnessed it all.

*"His device,"* said the voice in my head.

*"His creation for drawing people here. To make his creations. You could not control it. I tried to warn you, but you came here anyway."*

This was why I was here.

This thing in front of me.

It may have looked like a mirror, but it was something far more sinister. The memory, or at least part of it, sharpened in my mind, unlike most of my memories, which were scrambled even more now that many of them had left. My previous life, in London, somewhere called Earth, being a salesman, driving a car, riding a bus to work. That was all someone else's memories. Who was I? Where had I come from? I'd spent so many days now, searching for a way to get back to a world that wasn't even my own. Was it possible that this was where I had come from? Or maybe one of the doors that lead to other places? Was my home through one of those doors?

I looked back towards the mirror, and then to Adler and Rudy.

"That's your world through there. But it's not my world."

"How can you be sure?" asked Rudy.

"Because I remember some things, but I know that I have never known that place. I have never even been there. Those memories were his, they weren't mine. You should go."

Rudy stared at me.

"What? We can't leave you here. I can't leave you here."

"Yes, you can, you have to."

"I can't, and even if I wanted to I couldn't. I don't even know how to."

"Try going through it, going through the mirror, while it is still your world through it. I don't know if it will work, but if CutterJack can bring people through it, maybe you can go back that way. It may be the only chance you ever get."

"I don't think I can do it," said Rudy, shaking his head and backing away.

"You have to try. It may be the only chance you will ever get to go back home. I have to destroy this thing, and I have to do it now, before some other stupid disaster stops me from doing it."

"I think what Rudy is trying to say is that he doesn't want to," interrupted Adler.

I stood there for a moment, confused.

"Why?"

"Because back there I will just be dead!" said Rudy, "Back there, I will go, well, I don't know where I will go. At least with you, I still have something like a life. Back there I was homeless and alone. I led a pointless and hopeless life. At least here I have friends, and some purpose."

"What purpose?"

"To destroy those like him. To fight for something. To help you."

I didn't know what to say. It was Adler who spoke.

"I also have no reason to go back now. All the time I was alive, I sought to find my way back to my home, back to the life I led before, but now I am no longer living, and after having discovered all of this, this place, and the knowledge that there are other places, I don't want this to end. There is so much more to discover. Other worlds, James!"

"If you are sure?"

They both nodded.

"And besides," said Adler cheerfully, "we still have to find out who you really are, don't we?"

"Yes, it would seem that way. I thought I was starting to get some idea of who I was."

"Then let us start doing so right now. Destroy the device, before that evil thing that is no doubt waiting for us outside, somewhere, right now, trying to figure out how to get past the Maw and get in here, actually manages to."

I looked back at the mirror. The image of the toilet was gone. Now there was only darkness, no reflection.

CutterJack used this device to capture his victims, and I was here to destroy it. How I knew this, I could not remember, but I knew that it was what I had been sent here to do. I don't know who sent me here, or if there was even a plan for me to escape once I had succeeded, but I knew that if I didn't finish this now, countless more souls would suffer. Somehow the first time I had tried to do this, I had failed, it had trapped me.

"We can't use this to escape."

"No," said Adler. "I think you are right. My original ideas that he used it to travel were wrong. I can't see how it can be used to travel other than maybe using it to control someone on the other side, or bring people here. There has to be something else, another way. Or maybe it can be used in another way?"

"Yes, but how?"

I heard the familiar sound of DogThing growling.

"We need to find another door."

I felt something warm on my chest, and reached inside my shirt to pull out the compass. It was glowing. A spark of light shot out from it, to strike the mirror, and the darkness inside the glass vanished. Instead, there was a clear image of a wall. I squinted to see what might be significant about the wall. It wasn't like the ancient wall outside. This was made of bricks, not massive stone blocks, and it didn't look that old.

"Look," said Adler, pointing.

The image was changing. Where there had been bricks, there was now a seam of light surrounding what looked like the shape of a door. It opened slightly, and then the image was gone.

"I know that place. I've seen it before, but there is no door in that wall."

"Where is it?"

"It's over the great wall. The scaffolding goes higher, much higher, and then it goes over the wall at the top. I went there, once, a long time ago, long before I discovered this door. But it leads to a platform that goes over the void that is the other side of the wall. But it ends at a brick wall. I always thought it was a curious place to put a wall. It doesn't even block anything. It's just *there*, on a small rocky outcrop, at the end of the platform."

The compass glowed again.

"The direction of the compass has changed. It's like it's pointing us somewhere, towards the great wall."

"Then let us go, quickly. But first destroy that thing," said Adler.

I turned back to the mirror and drew my blade, turning it in my hand. With a grunt, I thrust the blunt pommel into the black glass. I hit it again, and again. On the third strike, the mirror shattered, scattering glass fragments across the room.

Unfortunately, so did the ground underneath me. Floorboards collapsed, bricks crumbled, and the roof of the building began to fall in. I stumbled, hauled myself up again and ran for the entrance. It seemed like the very fabric of the building was being torn apart. Through the gaps in the wall, I could see darkness and mist, and things, immense things, clawing at the building and tearing it apart.

I reached the doorway and jumped, barely landing on the scaffolding, skidding to a halt a few inches before I toppled over the edge.

I turned back around, bracing myself, expecting to see a building collapsing, but there was nothing. Even the door had gone.

DogThing sat a few feet away, waiting patiently for us.

"Where now?" asked Rudy, as I tried to get my breath back.

"We go up," I said, glancing at the levels of scaffolding platforms that rose up above us until the darkness swallowed them.

"And let's hope that door is still open when we get there."

Eight floors up and probably two hundred feet from the ground I discovered where the platform finally led to.

It was exactly as Adler had said. Instead of rising up further and further it drew level with the top of the wall that Adler was so convinced marked some kind of boundary that shouldn't be crossed, at least not from the ground. From there, the platform extended towards the wall, and then over it, where it stretched outwards into the darkness and continued on and on. I stood there for a moment, peering down over the other side of the wall, into the emptiness below. I could still see the ground behind us, and some of the Maw moving around. Most of them were up on the scaffolding, following us. The other side of the wall, where I had only been once, by pure accident, was an empty, endless void.

There was scaffolding holding up the walkway on the other side. Roughly every ten feet or so, the metal struts poked out of the darkness and upwards, to hold the wooden planks in place, but I couldn't see where they ended.

"Are we going across there?" asked Rudy.

I shrugged.

"I don't think we have a lot of choice."

"It is not far," said Adler, "even if it looks it. The wall on the outcrop is only just out of sight, along the platform."

DogThing was right behind us, and behind him came the rest of the Maw. Below, I could see what might be the last few stragglers jumping up onto the bottom of the wooden slope below.

It seemed to me as I walked across that rickety wooden platform, into the darkness ahead, that with every single step it might give way, and we would all tumble down into the darkness below. I'd only walked about ten feet when the wall with the door in it came into view, giving me a little more confidence to move on. I was about half way across the space between the top of the wall and the door at the end when I happened to glance back down into the darkness below.

I wished I hadn't done that.

Very little light was down there, only the faint glow from some stalactites that I could see high above us. I wondered if they were in the ceiling, and if there was a roof to this place that was just out of view. The crystals cast a small amount of light down onto the platform, and the ground below, just enough to see what was there.

At first I couldn't make out what it was that I was seeing; it looked like the surface of some strange rock formation, spread across the ground below. But as I stopped and squinted, trying to focus on the strange, bumpy shapes, something moved.

One of the rocks below shifted, nudging the one next to it. From there, a kind of wave effect spread across the ground. I still hadn't figured out what I was looking at, even though it was moving. I was convinced that I was viewing some new, and strange, but natural phenomenon.

Then one of the rocks looked up and moaned, and I realised that I wasn't seeing the ground at all. They weren't strange rocks. They were heads, every single one of them, thousands upon thousands crammed in together, moaning and moving, shifting, pushing and shoving each other.

The ground underneath the rickety platform that we were all walking on was a sea of zombies.

I stopped walking.

"Do you see them?"

"Yes." It was Rudy who answered.

*"Keep moving. Slowly. Quietly."*

The voice in my head.

*"Through the door. Go through the door. This will all be over soon."*

I focused. Tried to fight back the fear, the tiredness, and walked slowly forward, every moment telling myself over and over in my head that there was nothing there, nothing below us, only the door, just go through the door.

One step at a time the door got closer. One step at a time I breathed, slowly, deeply.

I stepped off the platform and onto the rocky ground. It was a small outcrop, as the professor had said, and the wall was merely a free standing block of bricks, maybe ten feet high and ten feet wide.

The edge of the door glowed faintly as I stepped nearer. I reached out to touch it, and just that slight touch was enough to open it.

I stepped through and stumbled into daylight.

I staggered, moving forward a few steps, struggling to grasp my new surroundings. The skeletal remains of massive, derelict buildings rose on either side of me. The ground was broken. It had probably been a road, once. Now grass and weeds broke the tarmac.

It was day, but it was still dark. Above me, the sun shone only through small gaps in the grey clouds that drifted overhead at a speed that was astonishing. A cold blast of wind gusted down the open street, and I had to brace against it to stop myself from falling over.

Rubble, broken windows and burnt out vehicles littered the street, and not just this street. I was standing in a dead end, with a solid wall behind me, except for the hole through which Rudy and Adler now stepped. The street stretched on and on, and beyond that were more ruined streets, more ruined buildings and vehicle wrecks.

From the seat of the car next to me stared the weathered, cold, bleach-boned face of someone who had been dead for a long time.

An entire city lying derelict, ruined and dead.

A noise behind me startled me, and I turned to see the Maw begin to flood through the hole, pacing down the street, spreading out, not stopping, so that the rest of their kind could escape through the door that we had opened. After a few minutes, they stopped coming through.

DogThing was by my side.

*"It's time to close it now,"* said the voice in my head.

I looked down at DogThing.

*"Before he escapes too. Before they come."*

Then I knew.

The voice in my head was DogThing, and he had been speaking to me all this time.

He looked back towards the door and started to growl. Other Maw nearby spun round and crouched down low, baring their teeth, ready to spring at whatever was coming from the other side, whatever was about to escape with us.

*"He comes,"* said DogThing.

I could hear the thud of heavy feet on the wooden platform, approaching fast. But he never got there in time.

I reached for the door. There was no handle to pull, so I grabbed the edge and pushed, quickly taking my hand away. The last thing I saw through the opening was CutterJack, a few feet away, reaching out with both hands, his one eye wide with anger or fear, running towards us. Behind him were his lizard pets, many of them, tearing along the wooden boards as fast as they could go, each of them with the look of death in their eyes, and beyond that a wave of moaning and screaming.

The cries of countless tortured souls.

I swore that I heard CutterJack scream just as the door closed and vanished, leaving a solid brick wall in front of me. I staggered back, expecting the wall to collapse in front of me, and CutterJack to come bursting through with his lizardcats and an army of zombies, but there was nothing.

It was over.

I turned, seeking the others, Adler and Rudy. They were a few feet away, staring up at the towering ruins that stretched on as far as I could see.

"Something terrible must have happened to this place," said Adler.

"I don't remember," I replied.

I turned back to DogThing and knelt down. This time he came forward and nuzzled his head in my lap. I ruffled his fur.

"You've been talking to me all along, haven't you?"

*"Yes, but I don't think you always heard me."*

"Why did you help me? Why did you help us?"

*"Because I'm your friend."*

"My friend? I don't remember."

*"I know. It was after you fell, after we found Nua'lath's device. I didn't understand why you weren't breaking it. That was why we went there. That was what we came here for."*

"Nua'lath?"

*"CutterJack. He goes by many names. That's what you always said."*

"So I've known you all along, right from the beginning? That's why you came to me in the junkyard?"

*"Yes. I came here with you, to destroy the device. I'm your guard, your companion. But you became something different, something I couldn't understand. After you looked into the device, you changed. You weren't you. There was someone else there. I was frightened."*

"You've always been with me haven't you? I just can't remember why?"

*"Yes. You raised me from when I was a puppy."*

"I raised you? I wish I could remember."

*"Ever since I can remember, I've followed you."*

"But the other Maw, where are they from?"

*"I'd never seen another one of my kind. They were trapped in there, in Nua'lath's prison. I found them. They didn't like me at the start, but they became my friends, and I told them that if they helped me, if they helped you, you would help them escape that place for ever."*

"Do you have a name, other than DogThing?"

*"No. That's what you always called me."*

I stood up and looked around at the world we had returned to. Somehow I knew that although we had escaped back to where we had started, this place was no more my home than the prison we had left behind. It should be familiar, but my memories still haven't returned.

We found a building not far down the street to camp up in for the night that still had windows, and a door that could be shut.

### **Day 39**

I slept well for the first time in weeks, and woke up to a sound that in my memory, I'd never even heard before. I looked through the dirt-crusted window and saw that outside, Rudy and Adler were listening, smiling, so I opened the door and joined them.

A grin crossed my face as I felt the warmth of the sun. High up on the top of the building across the street was a single nest of birds. I didn't know what sort of bird they were. One of them was perched on a ledge, just below the nest, singing.

This is the last page in this journal. I've run out of space to write for now, until I find another book. I'm sure I will soon.

So much still to discover and so many questions still unanswered, all locked away in my own mind.

There is a whole new place here for me to explore. Even as I look round, there are things that are somehow familiar, yet my own mind has locked it all away. I should be afraid, like I was when I first came round in the dark, in The Corridor. But I'm not alone this time. I've got Rudy and Adler, and I've got DogThing. It's amazing how much fear is lessened when you have friends to look out for you.

\* \* \* \* \*

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\* \* \* \* \*

The Journal of James Halldon continues...

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After escaping from The Corridor with DogThing, Rudy and Adler, James discovers that the world awaiting him outside is just as harsh as the one he had left behind.

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There is a place where nightmares are real. It is a dark and terrifying place, hidden from the world we know by borders that only the most unfortunate of souls will ever cross.



James Halldon woke up in the dark, alone, without any food or water, without a clue where he was, and with no memory of where he came from.

It only got stranger.

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# **EARTHFALL**

**Stephen Knight**

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Kindle Edition

*For Russ Knight, The Weird Beard*  
*"The Savior of Dallas Radio"*  
*May 3, 1932 – October 12, 2012*  
*I miss you, Dad.*

*The woman's face is still mostly smooth. The only signs of her true age are an array of laugh lines that crinkle whenever she smiles, which she does quite a bit, finding something humorous in almost every situation. Her hair is a tawny blond, its rich color diminished somewhat by the encroaching grays, the ones she's just not vain enough to try to hide behind the quick fixes of bottled hair products. The woman—and more importantly, the man who adores her—knows that youth and vitality are more about what's on the inside than what's on the outside. The interior is what's important, and only a precious few intimates get to see that. The exterior? Hell, everyone else on the planet can see that, free of charge.*

*The girls look like both of them, a mix of her fair skin and honey-colored hair, but with his eyes and nose. He thinks the nose looks much better on them than on him. It confers an impression of quiet, regal strength that makes him wonder how they'll fare in the coming years when boys begin to circle around them. Would they take the males on head-to-head as he would, or would they instead use the mother's good nature and occasional guile? He finds he almost can't wait to find out, but he knows these things will happen sooner than he'll want. It's not going to be easy watching them winnow away the list of suitors until they find the right ones. And when that happens, they won't be his little girls any longer.*

*He pulls open the screen door on the small house they leased on the plains of Kansas, where the land is flat and seems to go on forever, broken only occasionally by trees or telephone poles that stand a silent vigil in the heat of the midday sun. From somewhere in the humid, sticky distance, a crow caws, and he feels a momentary portent of dread flutter across his heart. But why? The day is perfect, the weather calm, and his family waits for him only a few steps away in the small kitchen. He enters the room, and the girls shriek with delight as they leap toward him with no hesitation, even though he's been gone for so many years of their lives that he sometimes feels he barely knows them. His wife's smile is broad and welcoming, and her dark eyes twinkle as she turns from the kitchen counter, forgetting about the lunch she had been about to serve.*

*"Well, it's about time, stranger!" she says, laughing, her voice bright and clear.*

*Behind him, the crow caws again.*

He awoke to the total darkness that could be found only beneath the surface of the earth. He lay in his rack and listened to the sounds of the base: the gentle whisper of climate-controlled air moving through the ductwork, the muted sounds of equipment operating, the occasional footfalls in the corridor outside his quarters as someone walked past. The clock on the nightstand read 0246. He wasn't officially on duty for over five hours, but he knew he wouldn't be sleeping much more.

The dream. Always the dream.

Sometimes when he awoke, he was filled with an overwhelming despair that made him contemplate suicide. So easy, so amazingly easy, to end it. The varieties of method to his self-inflicted demise were endless. Gunshot. Overdose. Hanging. Slashing his wrists and bleeding out in the shower. Or simply accessing one of the emergency exits, where he could climb up to the surface and let God do His work as he walked back to the house.

Other times, he awoke clear-headed and mostly free of the numbing despair. But the sad loneliness was always there, followed by the shame that he had failed to execute the one mission that mattered most. That failure left him an empty shell most days, making him into little more than a ghost that haunted the base. The vitality, the zest for life, the need to serve and carry out his sworn duties ... all fell by the wayside, washed out of him like the rays of the sun could diminish the colors of an old photograph.

*Why*, he always asked himself as he lay alone in the darkness in small, cramped quarters. *Why them? Why not me?*

The base had no answer.

**T**HE WASTELAND WAS as dry and barren as the surface of the moon. Over the course of decades, the topsoil had been bleached by the sun's searing rays, the soil converted to chalky dust. No vegetation remained, for no life could exist in a land where the earth and air had been poisoned by nuclear weapons. Sandy ridges and wind-carved rock stood mute sentinel to the passage of time. Despite the fact the land was completely lifeless, the casual observer—had there been one—might still have considered the wasteland austere beautiful.

Hidden beneath a pulsating brown-black mass, a vast cloud stalked across the forbidding wasteland like some hungry beast stirring after a long hibernation, the horizon but a memory. Tens of miles across, the ferocious sandstorm grew larger by the second, illuminated by sporadic flashes of lightning. Riding the stiff breeze, the storm's top rose almost seventy thousand feet into the dry air, which no longer enjoyed the benefit of an ozone layer to strip away harmful radioactive particles emitted by the distant sun. The storm surged forward at more than sixty miles per hour, devouring the land before it, ravaging the wasteland even further with cyclonic winds full of debris that could strip a man's flesh from his bones in minutes.

Despite the hostile environment, the powerful storm, and the radiation—both man-made and heaven-sent—there was life.

A gigantic, eight-wheeled, all-terrain vehicle bolted across the gently rolling landscape, trailing a rooster-tail of dust. While the vehicle raced away from the storm, it became briefly airborne as it crested a small ridge before it slammed back to the parched earth, rocking on its heavy-duty suspension. The rig's turbine engines roared as they propelled Self-Contained Exploration Vehicle 4 along at almost sixty miles an hour. It wasn't fast enough. The monstrous storm continued to close, and the gap between its amorphous leading edge and the dirty vehicle slowly narrowed.

Strapped into the driver's seat, Captain Mike Andrews kept his eyes rooted on the desert landscape outside the thick viewports. His left hand kept the rig's control column pushed fully forward, and the system's drive-by-wire technology translated the action into full power to the rig's large, knobbed tires. The ride was far from comfortable, of course. Even though the SCEV had been designed to withstand harsh punishment in the field for months at a time, there was a limit to what suspension technology could dampen. Hurtling along at old highway speeds across broken terrain was one of the things it couldn't handle.

"Hey, listen, the temperature's going through the roof on number one," Choi said, squirming slightly in the copilot's seat beside Andrews. He was a few years younger than the vehicle commander, but his even temper and genuine likeability made him an asset in the field during the long reconnaissance runs they made four times a year. Now, though, Choi was obviously agitated, and not just from the SCEV's violent

progress over the landscape that had once been western Kansas. It wasn't the close proximity of the storm causing him discomfort, either. Andrews knew the chance the vehicle might be forced to spend days waiting out the storm within only a few miles of Harmony Base was getting to Choi. Hell, it was getting to him as well. After thirty-three days in the field, all Andrews wanted was to get back to Harmony and soak in the small bathtub in his quarters. The SCEV's accommodations were fairly excellent, but confining eight people inside a vehicle that had less than four hundred square feet of living space for a month was enough to make anyone long for privacy.

Choi pointed out the temperature tape on the multifunction display set in the instrument panel between the two men. Andrews only glanced at it, but he could see the number one engine's temperature had spiked dramatically over the past few minutes.

"Listen, if you don't back off soon, you're going to blow number one," Choi said.

"Like hell, Tony. The computer'll shut it down first. But so what? That's why we have two engines in these things." Andrews patted the lip of the SCEV's gray instrument panel. "Hang in there, babe. Almost home, just hang in there."

"Yeah, that's gonna work."

Andrews looked at the weather radar display. "It'd better, man. That storm's a hot one, and if it catches us, we'll lose the base's homing beacon. No way I'm backing off now—this is our only shot."

"So what are we going to do if number one shuts down? The storm'll catch us for sure."

"Spencer!" Andrews shouted.

"What up?" A small, squat man appeared in the door that separated the SCEV's cramped cockpit from the not-so-cramped work area in the center of the vehicle. By regulations, the pressure doors separating the three compartments were supposed to be closed, but with the vehicle lurching and bucking across the terrain, Andrews just didn't have it in him to make what already felt like a coffin even smaller. If he was in the back, he'd have a tough time not blowing chow all over the place.

"One's getting close to thermal shutdown, but I need it," Andrews told the crew chief. "What can I do about it?"

Spencer looked at the multifunction display, then tabbed through the couple of screens. He grunted and returned the display to the main situation page. "Particle separator's shitting the bed, which means the engine's taking in dirty air. I can suppress the alert and raise the shutdown threshold, but the engine's gonna fry. Walleyes won't be happy about that," Spencer added, referring to the commanding officer of the base's vehicle section by his informal—and completely impolite—nickname.

Andrews considered his options. So far in his career, he'd been able to steer clear of Colonel Larry Walters's wrath, which he had visited upon every other SCEV commander over the past decade since the Sixty Minute War. Walters was a ticket-punching chump, one of the Old Guard, and Andrews didn't much care for him. But he was a superior officer, even if he was far too old to be a full-bird colonel. But there was no retiring to Tampa or Sun Valley or Bangkok anymore, which meant Andrews and



every other SCEV skipper would have to deal with Walters's shit until he dropped dead from old age or was relieved of command.

In the end, Andrews figured that if he was going to have a run-in with Walters, it might as well be over something fairly major, like burning up the core of a precious SCEV powerplant.

"Do it," he told Spencer. "A direct order, and if you want me to use my code to access the vehicle engineering module, I'll be happy to do it."

"Nah, I got it. Just back me up when someone tries to nail my ass to the wall. Gimme a sec, I'll use the station back here." With that, the swarthy crew chief returned to the multipurpose workstation located only a few feet away. Choi looked back at him, then at Andrews.

"You're putting him on the line, Mike," he said softly.

"He's not doing shit, I'm the one who doesn't want to be out here in this storm," Spencer said. "You see the size of it? That thing'll last for a week before it blows out, and frankly, this thing smells like a can of farts. And I want out."

"The fart smell would be mostly *your* fault, Spencer," Leona Eklund said, her voice carrying to the cockpit over the roar of the rig's engines and the various creaks, groans, and scrapes caused by the vehicle's transit over the rough terrain. Andrews had to grin. It was true; one of the biggest drawbacks to crewing with Todd Spencer was the fact he emitted an exceptionally vile amount of swamp gas, no matter what he ate, and no matter what medication had been prescribed to prevent it. Whatever foulness lurked inside him, Spencer's body tried valiantly to eject it through his sphincter.

"Yeah, yeah, too bad all of us can't fart potpourri like you do, princess," Spencer said. "Captain, I've raised the threshold on number one, but listen, you've got maybe three, four minutes until it fails. Keep that in mind."

"Roger that, Spence. Thanks."

An alarm went off then, sharp and strident—the lightning strike indicator flashed in the corner of one primary display as the storm behind them fired off great discharges of electrostatic energy, one of the things that made the great sandstorms that plagued the former Midwestern United States such a terror for the SCEV teams to deal with. Not only did they pack hurricane-force winds, they also cast off powerful cyclones and great bolts of lightning that homed in on virtually anything metallic. Despite the vast amount of advanced technology that went into insulating the SCEVs, they were still comprised of a good deal of metal.

Brilliant light flared outside, and for an instant Andrews saw the SCEV's shadow grow remarkably long before the pulsing illumination. The lightning strike indicator blared again, and then the lights inside the rig dimmed momentarily. Andrews thought he saw whiplashes of the electrical discharge roll across the SCEV's blunted nose like St. Elmo's fire, spectral and wraithlike. The cockpit displays fluttered for a moment as they reset themselves from the pulsing effects of the charge, but it was the sudden **BANG!** and the sound of the number one engine winding down that held Andrews's undivided attention.

"Talk to me, somebody," he said. "I've got power falling off up here. Spencer, did that particle separator finally fail and take the engine with it?"

"Negative, it's better than that. Looks like that lightning bolt invoked a compressor stall in the same engine," the crew chief reported. "I'm looking into it. Choi, reset the ignition switches and secure the generator. I'll run the restart from back here."

Choi reached up to the overhead panel and did what Spencer asked. He missed a switch combination because the vehicle was rocking hard over uneven ground, but he managed to get it right on the second shot. Outside the viewports, thick dust began to swirl. The rig's speed was dropping past fifty miles per hour, and the storm was catching up to them. Andrews kept the sidearm controller fully forward, but the SCEV was delivering only as much speed as her remaining engine could generate.

"Spencer, talk to me," he said.

"Working on it."

"We're in max commo range," Choi said. "Maybe we ought to let the base know we're coming?"

"Spencer?"

"Still working on it," Spencer said. "Call Harmony, Captain. Spend some time chatting up someone else—I'm busy."

Andrews pressed the red transmit button. "Harmony Base, this is SCEV Four. We're inbound on a course of three-three-five magnetic. We're on a storm run, and we'll require immediate entry by north lift. Over."

Over static broken only by cracks and the whistling, sporadic pops that synchronized perfectly with the flashes of lightning outside, Andrews heard a tinny voice in his headset.

"SCEV Four, this is Harmony Base. Roger your SITREP. You're cleared for north lift. Over."

"Roger that, Harmony. Make sure it's lit up like a Christmas tree. Visibility's going to suck substantially by the time we get there. Over."

"SCEV Four, Harmony. Lift is on its way, and it will be fully illuminated. Over."

"Harmony, roger."

Andrews turned to Spencer. "I'm not seeing any torque increase on number one up here, Spence. No pressure, but that storm's right on our ass and we'll be losing the beacon pretty soon. After that, it's up to my Mark One Eyeballs and a compass to get us to the lift."

"Yeah, yeah," Spencer said. "Keep your shirt on."

"Come on, man! Get that damn engine started!" Tilly Rodgers called from the back.

"Yeah, get it squared away!" Leona added.

"Blow me, both of you! I'm working on it!"

Choi paged through the system's status pages on the multifunctional display. "Engine's too hot, man. The computer's sitting on it like an eight hundred pound gorilla."

"Spence, what's the problem?" Andrews asked.

"It's too hot! The computer won't let it torque up enough to turn over," Spencer said, frustration evident in his voice.

"Point for me," Choi said.

"Spence, you said you could raise the thermal threshold so that it would keep on running."

"And I did, but the engine's got its own onboard computer, and it's getting in the way. The only way that's going to change is if I rip up the floor and yank the module from the side of the engine, but that means we'll have to stop." The SCEVs had been designed to allow even major repair work to be conducted from the inside, so that its crew wouldn't have to step outside into extremely hazardous conditions to replace a transaxle or computer chip. But that meant pulling up the deck, and doing so would invoke safety overrides that prevented the machine from moving. Either way, the storm would overtake them.

"Just do whatever you can do," Andrews said. "Including getting out and pushing. Choi, give me the numbers?"

"Electromag interferometer's pegged at two thousand volts. Distance from leading edge is one thousand meters, rate of closure one hundred thirty-four clicks per hour. It'll take us down in less than three minutes."

"All right, you guys, hang on back there. It's not going to get any smoother." Andrews patted the SCEV's instrument panel once again. "Come on, baby, come on ..."

"Four, this is Harmony. Lift is up and illuminated. Over."

"Much obliged, Harmony. We'll be coming in hot. Over."

"Roger that, Four."

Daylight ebbed outside the viewports. Swirling dust blew across the thick glass, and Andrews glanced down at the infrared picture in the upper left corner of the functional display. The dust was thick enough to mute infrared images, which meant they would soon be blind.

*So I guess this means all we'll have left is a compass.*

An alarm chirped, and engine one suddenly came to life, its growling whine slowly building to a crescendo. As soon as it began delivering power to the rig's transmissions, the SCEV suddenly felt more nimble—or as nimble as a forty-ton vehicle could.

"Spencer, you're the *man!*" Andrews said. "How'd you manage to get it started?"

"Busted into the engine's integrated computer and shut down the thermal module," Spencer said. "I did that because I'm brilliant and all, in case anyone was wondering."

From the back came a chorus of jeers. Andrews toned them out as he raised his voice.

"Listen, folks, sorry, but I'm segmenting the vehicle," he said. "Embrace the suck." As he spoke, the two pressure doors that separated the rig's three compartments slid closed. Andrews and Choi were sealed off in the cockpit.

"So how're we doing this?" Choi asked as the big SCEV swayed from side to side. The leading edge of the storm had caught up to it, and the winds were battering the slab-sided vehicle.

"We run like hell and hope we can make it to the lift before the storm shuts us out," Andrews said. "But if we screw it up and drive right into the side of the lift, then at least we won't be around to listen to Walleyes."

"If 'we' screw it up? Who is this 'we' you're talking about, white man?"

"Attaboy, Choi, back me up all the way."

The SCEV had lost too much ground to the storm.

Even as it accelerated forward, bumping and crashing over the dry landscape, the storm's leading edge enveloped the vehicle, shrouding it beneath a shifting, inky darkness that made Andrews think the rig had just been swallowed whole by some sort of land-borne leviathan. Choi activated the rig's infrared systems, but it was of little help; the swirling dust reduced the amount of heat that could be read by the high-tech device's super-chilled planar array, rendering it as effective as Andrews's eyeballs.

"The suck has arrived," Choi said.

"We're still on course, and the GPS says we should be at the lift in a minute or so," Andrews told him. "Keep your eyes open."

As he drove, Andrews flipped on the SCEV's array of high-intensity floodlights. They gave him an additional twenty or thirty feet visibility now that the sunlight was being pared down by the storm, but he still couldn't see comfortably. All he had to go by were the instruments, and even the military-grade GPS satellites that had been launched prior to the war were accurate only to within ten feet. If visibility was reduced much more, they could drive right past the lift without anyone noticing it.

"There!" Choi said a moment later, pointing out the diamond-matrix viewport. "Right there, I see the strobe! You got it?"

Andrews leaned forward. The straps of his four-point harness dug into his shoulders as he looked at the heads-up display. Sure enough, there was a very faint winking in the darkness ahead. Bands of dust would obscure it entirely, then lessen for just an instant to allow him to perceive more light. He compared the flashing with the GPS location on the multifunction display. If it was right, then he was nearly on top of the box-shaped lift.

He yanked back on the sidearm controller and stomped on the brakes. The SCEV slewed crazily as its wheels locked up, sending it skidding across the dry, sandy ground.

It came to a rest only feet away from the lift's open entrance. The lights inside the large cubicle gleamed dully, their tepid illumination no challenge to the storm's all-encompassing darkness.

"Yeah, I got it," Andrews said.

"Could you have stopped a little more, you know, artfully?" Choi asked.

Andrews released a long sigh. "Probably, but why make it easy?"

He coaxed the SCEV into the waiting lift. The vehicle bumped slightly as it crossed the threshold, its array of high-intensity fog lights illuminating the big cubicle's interior. A layer of dust already coated the floor, masking the yellow positioning circle painted on the elevator's flat floor. Andrews pulled the SCEV into position by memory and triple-clicked the TRANSMIT button on the sidearm controller. The pulses from the rig's radio were read by the receiver inside the lift, and the elevator's thick, double-pocket pressure doors slid closed, shutting out the dark, seething fury of the storm as it reached full force. Yellow strobes flashed outside the rig's viewports as the atmospheric scrubbers came on, venting radioactive dust and other airborne particulates from the air inside the elevator. After a few moments, an alarm sounded over the radio, three strident tones. At the same time, the strobes outside turned from

yellow to red. The SCEV bounced on its stiff suspension for a moment as the elevator commenced its descent.

“Bay Control, this is SCEV Four. We’re secure and on our way down for an in-and-out. Over,” Andrews said over the radio.

“Roger that, SCEV Four. Welcome back to Harmony Base. Over.”

“Roger that, Harmony,” Andrew replied. “It’s good to be back.” With that, he and Choi finally relaxed, sinking back into the padding of their seats. Through the pressure door behind them, they could hear the rest of the crew applauding. It was good to be home—even if home was a windowless, subterranean fortress buried over a hundred feet below the Earth’s surface.

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The SCEV Decontamination Center was their first stop after the elevator doors opened. The chamber was large and well-lit, the floor comprised of thick grating that creaked slightly beneath the vehicle’s weight as it trundled out of the lift. Andrews brought the rig to a halt inside a painted circle in the middle of the room and, once again, yellow strobes flashed. On the way down, Choi had opened the shield doors that separated them from the rest of the crew, and Spencer entered the tight cockpit and crouched between the seats. He examined the instrument panel critically, even though the displays were shown on his own station directly aft of the cockpit.

“Is there a problem?” Andrews asked the engineer as he looked out the side viewport and verified the rig was dead center in the circle. “Left side, check.”

“Right side, check,” Choi responded, verifying the SCEV’s position from the right side.

“Had a few tweaks on one of the differentials,” Spencer said, paging through the system situation display in the center of the console. “I just want to verify it from up here. You mind?”

“So long as you don’t fart,” Choi said.

“No sweat, I’m saving it for later.” Spencer paged through the display menus. “Yeah, it registered on this station, too. Looks like I’m going to be tearing this baby apart for the next couple of weeks.”

“Knock yourself out, little brother,” Andrews said. “We’re not going anywhere soon.”

“SCEV Four, Bay Control,” a voice said over the radio. “Stand by for external decon. Over.”

“Light us up, Bay Control. Over. Spencer, any reason we can’t start the recovery checklist, or is there something else you need to do?”

“Negative, I’m good. Let’s get on the checklists.” Spencer retreated to his station as the strobe lights outside turned from yellow to red. Several robotic arms descended from the decon center’s ceiling, each equipped with a large nozzle. The SCEV crew began their arrival checklists, and the arms sprayed the vehicle with thick streams of detergent-laden water. They weaved about the rig in a complex pattern, hitting it from every angle and blasting away the hazardous dirt and grime the vehicle had accumulated during its run. As Choi read off the checklist items and Spencer verified

settings and switch positions, Andrews looked out the viewports, watching as filthy water cascaded down the rig's sloped nose. SCEV Four was being sprayed with more water than it had encountered in over a month of field time. The thought depressed him. In fact, the entire act of returning to Harmony empty-handed left him feeling hollow. Everyone in the base had been counting on them to return with some good news, with reports that, over a decade after the Sixty Minute War, humanity was flourishing somewhere in what had once been the United States of America. Failing that, people wanted some evidence that Harmony Base wasn't humanity's last outpost.

Andrews hated to be the one to disappoint them.

"Yo, Captain, you with me?" Choi asked.

Andrews looked up, surprised to discover he'd zoned out during the checklist procedure. "What?"

"I said, 'secondary generator switch to standby position.' I can see it is, but you know, you have to respond."

Andrews sighed and checked the switch both visually and by touch. "In standby." His voice sounded tired even to his own ears.

**M**AJOR GENERAL MARTIN Benchley sat behind his desk and paged through the series of consumption reports on his tablet, reading them without even really seeing them. After years of doing so, he knew what the base's usual rhythms were, what readings were wrong, and what consumables were being wasted. It was not unusual for him to operate on autopilot. But when he realized he'd scrolled through to the end of the document without retaining *anything*, he knew he would be revisiting the data once again. Benchley sighed and rubbed his eyes. Other senior officers might have been content to review the executive summary and sign off but, as the commanding general of Harmony Base, he didn't have that luxury. If something went wrong or if some vital resource was being squandered, he was the last line of defense. His position mandated that he always remain vigilant—no matter what.

He regarded the array of flat-screen displays that adorned the wall opposite his desk. He could view any common area inside the base from his office, everything from the engineering spaces to the dining facilities to the corridor outside. He had watched the arrival of SCEV Four on one of those very monitors. The dusty rig had made a gutsy run for the elevator despite a last-second mechanical glitch, even though procedure mandated they shut down and wait out the deadly tempest before trying to gain entry to the base. He'd already heard from Colonel Walters, the eternally dissatisfied head of the vehicle maintenance area, who'd ranted for some time about the fact that Andrews was obviously disregarding procedure and putting his crew and their precious, thirty-seven-million-dollar Self-Contained Exploration Vehicle at extreme risk. Benchley shut Walters down as gently as he could. While he was essentially correct—Benchley himself had mandated that procedures be followed to the letter, as they might be the only thing standing between life and certain death—the fact of the matter was, the general was eager to get his hands on the SCEV team's report. They had concluded the first long-range reconnaissance survey of the central United States since the Sixty Minute War, and Benchley was not alone in wanting to discover what they had learned.

The base was the last remaining holdover from the old Cold War. Originally initiated during the Reagan Administration, Harmony had been designed to restore the United States after a possible thermonuclear conflict with the Soviet Union. Full of seed stocks, cryogenically suspended animal embryos, staffed with brilliant scientists, engineers, and competent military tradesmen, tacticians, and troops, the subterranean outpost had been designed to be self-sufficient for fifty years. The place was one of the very largest hardened sites ever created. There was enough room for almost a thousand people. Its warehouses were stuffed full of everything that might be needed: freeze-dried and vacuum-sealed foods, petroleum products that had been treated with long-term stabilizers to ensure their combustibility, thousands of books in both paper

and electronic formats, tools, building materials, even precious stones and gold, should those become necessary to whatever post-apocalypse society might spread after the bombs dropped. No stone had been left unturned.

Harmony had fared well, even during the tightest budget periods, when political administrations had been tempted to suspend money for the long-running budget. The base had always had a surfeit of hardcore proponents—in the halls of Congress, the military, and the private sector—to ensure its survival. But the base's most surprising benefactors turned out to be the terrorists behind September 11, 2001. They had helped renew interest in the multi-billion-dollar installation during a time when America was more interested in the peace dividend caused by the dissolution of the old Soviet Union. The attacks on American soil had galvanized those holding the black project's purse strings into action, and the money had started to flow once again. Harmony was retrofitted and restocked with the latest technologies, a trend that continued and even accelerated once the diseased Russian Federation finally died, and the progeny of the old authoritarian Communists rose again. The cycle began anew, the United States of America once again faced a monolithic threat.

When the war finally came, it punished not just America, but the entire globe. The event began without warning, as far as Benchley could tell. One moment, he was contemplating his upcoming retirement, the next, he was ordered to seal the base as the missiles tracked across the sky. As mushroom clouds bloomed across the planet, Harmony was finally good to go on its mission.

For the past six months, the SCEVs had been setting off into the field, conducting their surveys. After a decade of isolation, it was time for Harmony Base to enact the second part of its charter: *Quando mundum finit opus nos incipiet*.

*When the world ends, our mission begins.*

What Benchley and everyone in Harmony Base wanted to know: *Are we alone? Are we all that's left?* That was all they cared about now, after almost a decade of isolation, biding their time beneath the Earth's surface and—

A chime sounded, and Benchley looked up at the bank of monitors again. Four hours after SCEV Four's arrival, Captain Mike Andrews stood in the corridor outside, flanked by two enlisted MPs. As he watched, a crowd of passersby tried to extend their congratulations to Andrews, so many that the big MPs stood no chance of holding them back. Andrews appeared to accept the attention as stoically as he could. Benchley noted the slump to the younger man's shoulders and the drawn, almost pained expression on his face when he acknowledged the presumably good tidings extended by the others. Benchley wondered if Andrews's expression held all the answers he would ever need.

He feared exactly that.

Benchley rose and walked to the office door, his powerful stride belying his sixty-six years. He had been ready for retirement before the Sixty Minute War, with only two weeks left on post before rotating out and ending his service with the United States Army. Of course, the launch of several nuclear weapons against the US had put his retirement plans on hold—forever. He opened the metal door and it slid inward on well-oiled hinges. Benchley had no secretary. She'd been on leave before the war struck, and he hadn't seen any reason to replace her. He crossed the small outer



office, opened the door to the corridor, and waved inside the three men waiting in the hall.

"Come in, Andrews. You men mind waiting in the outer office while I debrief the captain?" The two MPs shook their heads in unison.

"No, sir," the senior man said.

"Thank you. Go ahead and make yourselves comfortable." Benchley ran a hand over his close-cropped silver hair and motioned to his office. "In there if you will, Captain."

"Yes, sir," Andrews said. He carried a small nylon bag with him as he stepped into the office. Benchley followed him in and shut the door.

"Have a seat, son. Good to see you home safe and sound. Looks like Mother Nature threw you a last-minute monkey wrench, eh?"

"Yes, sir." Andrews settled into one of the visitor's chairs facing Benchley's desk only after the general had set himself. "But that's what happens when you try to keep a schedule."

"Indeed. All right, we'll keep this short. I know you've been away for quite some time, and you're probably eager to get back to life."

Andrews opened the nylon bag and pulled out a binder and two thumb drives. He handed the items over to Benchley, who placed the electronic devices on his desk. He opened the binder, which was Andrews's written log of SCEV Four's sojourn through the wasteland. The logs kept by every SCEV commander constituted the sole remaining paper in Harmony Base. Benchley flipped through it quickly, scanning the neat print.

"It's all collated, sir. Lieutenant Eklund's analyses are complete, and Engineer Spencer will have the—"

"Let's cut to the chase, Andrews. What did you find?"

Andrews hesitated for a long moment, then released a heavy sigh. "I'm sorry, sir. The mission was a wash."

Even though he had been ready to hear it—or thought he had—the news hit Benchley like a physical blow. He sagged back into his chair and looked across the desk at Andrews. For his part, the young captain returned his gaze with forlorn eyes.

"That's ... damned disappointing, Andrews. I'd hoped a long-range recon would turn something up. We *can't* be the only survivors of the war ..."

"And we probably aren't, sir. We've just been looking in the wrong places." Andrews appeared more animated now, shrugging off the depressing reality of his report in a way that only the young could. "The Pacific Northwest is our best bet. Everywhere from Los Angeles to New York was hit with at least one nuclear device during the war, and anything that wasn't was covered by the fallout. The winds are still hot outside, even ten years later—the only place anyone could possibly survive outside of hardened bunkers would be in the Northwest. You give the word, sir, and I'll have my rig ready to roll in three days."

Benchley smiled despite himself. Andrews was a true go-getter, perhaps the one SCEV commander he trusted above all others. He was thorough, meticulous, and smart enough to know when to flex the rules a little bit to get something done. Best of all, he was a keen motivator, a trait that years of being trapped underground, slaves to

repetition and outright boredom, had almost been eliminated in the Harmony Base culture. Andrews still had it, however, carrying his enthusiasm like a badge. Even though he had little but bad news to report, the young officer was rallying himself to charge out into the field and try again. In the process, Benchley noticed his own sagging spirits being lifted by Andrews.

*Thank God for this boy, and all the others like him.*

"I appreciate your can-do attitude, Andrews. Really. I'll give your request full consideration, but my instinct is to stick to the schedule for now. In the meantime, myself and the rest of the command staff will go over your findings. Expect to be fully debriefed on Friday, which should give you enough time to get your personal affairs in order."

Andrews looked disappointed. "Your call, sir. But we're ready to jump out on this one. I mean, we're *really* ready and—"

Benchley held up a hand. "I get it, Mike. I get it. I have to consult with the rest of the command staff before I make any sweeping changes to the recon schedule, and you know that. I really will consider making the change, but I need to discuss it with the rest of the team. Trust me on this one, okay?"

Andrews smiled wryly. "Trust has never been a problem here, sir. But if you don't mind me saying so, you might be acting a little too ... *conservatively* about this."

"Me? Conservative? Bite your tongue, Captain—I'm practically a flaming liberal regarding issues like this." Benchley rose to his feet and smoothed out the blouse of his Army Combat Uniform, the standard duty dress in Harmony Base. Andrews practically rocketed upright, instantly standing at attention.

"Anyway, congratulations, Captain. After thirty-three days in the field, I can absolutely and without reservation confirm that you and your crew have done well. Now go home. You look like hell."

Andrews saluted. Benchley returned the gesture, then held out his hand. Andrews took it, his grip firm. The grip of an adventurer, Benchley thought. If there was a post-apocalyptic Lewis and Clark, Cook, Perry, or even James T. Kirk, Mike Andrews was that man.

"Thanks, sir. Let me know if there's anything in the log that needs clarification," Andrews said.

"Of course. Now get out of here," Benchley said. "You have a young wife to see." He hoped his smile didn't reflect the heaviness he felt in his heart. If Andrews noticed, it didn't show. In fact, the reference to his wife seemed to rejuvenate him. To Benchley, it appeared Andrews couldn't get out of his office quickly enough. The captain stepped out of the office and allowed the heavy door to clang shut behind him, and Benchley slowly sank back into his chair. He put a hand on the logbook before him, palm down, as if he could somehow distill all the disappointment and thrashed dreams without having to actually wade through the reports.

He shook his head slowly. There was nothing to be gained by putting off the bad news.

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The lights inside Andrews's quarters were off, masking the small dwelling in the pervasive, all-encompassing darkness found only deep underground. He slowly closed the door behind him, latching it quietly.

"Command: lights, twenty percent," he said. Though his voice was as soft and quiet as he could make it, it still sounded harsh and loud inside the apartment's stillness. The AI executed his command, and the overhead lights slowly brightened until the small living room was bathed in a pale amber glow. For a moment, Andrews just stood in place, looking around the small apartment. Though it was tiny, it was practically a palace compared to an SCEV, and he luxuriated in the surfeit of open space. He stepped around the decidedly no-frills couch to the kitchenette and tugged open the door of the small refrigerator. He smiled when he saw four bottles inside. Rachel had managed to score them from one of Harmony's brewmasters, another engineer who worked in the Core. She probably had to work double shifts for a week to pay for the veritable liquid gold, but that was the kind of woman she was. The end of the world had ensured that there would never be such a thing as a free beer, which meant she would have to pay for the goods with labor. Andrews ran a hand through his dark blond hair and considered the bottles greedily. He desperately wanted one right now, but there was a time for everything. Though it took a surprising amount of self-control, Andrews refrained.

Instead, he headed for the small partition on the far side of the apartment, the bedroom, which occupied a space less than six feet wide by eight feet deep. Andrews stopped at the bedroom's narrow entrance and listened. The AI had left the lights switched off here, and in the pitch-black darkness that dominated the tiny bedroom, he heard Rachel breathing. Slow, even, and deep. He stood still and waited for his eyes to adjust. After a time he could make out her slumbering figure, barely a silhouette beneath the linens. He continued to watch her sleep, her face turned away from him, her dark hair spilling across the pillow like a waterfall of shadow. Her work uniform lay in a crumpled heap at the foot of the bed, and he bent over and picked it up. Smoothing out a few wrinkles, he opened the microscopic closet set into the wall and hung the single-piece uniform on a hanger. He did the same with his own duty uniform, then carefully crawled into bed and stretched out beside his wife. Despite his best efforts, she stirred; after all, who wouldn't if they felt someone slinking into their bed when their husband was away?

"Mike?" she asked, voice blurry from what Andrews guessed was too much work and too little sleep. Before he could say anything, Rachel bolted upright in the bed with a gasp, reaching for him with one hand. She felt his face in the darkness, and he kissed her fingertips.

"Miss me?"

"Mike! Oh, God—" Her embrace almost crushed the breath from him, and Andrews laughed at the ferocity of it. Thirty-three days was a long time for a man to be away from his wife, and it was good to see she felt the same way.

"Easy there. Don't break the merchandise, hon."

"I'm so sorry!" There was genuine regret in her voice, which puzzled Andrews.

"It's no big deal."

She laughed and pulled away from him long enough to take his face in her hands. "No, no ... not about that. I'm sorry I didn't meet you at Receiving. I must have slept through the pages. I worked the overnight shift as well as the morning shift, and I just stretched out for a quick nap, but—"

Andrews put a finger to her lips. "Rachel, it's no big deal. So I had to walk another couple of hundred feet to see you. Not a problem. Really." He kissed her gently. "Anyway. *Did* you miss me, or is there something else we need to talk about?"

"I don't want to talk," Rachel said, pulling him close. She wrapped her legs around him and gripped his shoulders with an intent that Andrews was well familiar with.

THE COMMAND CENTER of Harmony Base was a high-tech affair, a dimly lit room populated by workstations and displays of all sizes and brightness. From here, the personnel on duty monitored the condition of the subterranean installation, home to almost a thousand people. All internal metrics were captured and stored and, if necessary, reviewed. It was mostly mind-numbingly boring work, a repetitive process of staring at screens, monitoring the internal affairs of Harmony Base, and keeping the occasional eye turned toward the happenings on the surface over a hundred feet above their heads. But studying the surface was even more boring. Ever since the Sixty Minute War had essentially eradicated the ozone layer, solar radiation continued to bombard the planet, causing the Earth's surface to waste away even further. Beyond dusty rock and parched earth, there was almost nothing left outside to see. Not even a *cockroach* remained alive out there, so it was a rare circumstance for something outside to merit any discussion beyond *Hey, look at how big that dust storm is*, or *Well, it might not look like Kansas ... but it still is*.

"Sorry, Colonel, but do you have a second?"

Corrine Baxter looked up. Barney Rosen, the lone technician manning the External Observation Station located in one corner of the Command Center was facing her direction, leaning back in his chair. Baxter simply stared at him for a moment before responding.

*EOS wants to talk?*

Baxter pushed away from her desk at the back of the Command Center and stood. She straightened her uniform and walked over to the EOS station.

"What is it, Rosen?"

"We've just detected another tremor, ma'am. One point four on the Richter, same general epicenter as yesterday."

Baxter had to think back to the morning briefing to recall what the sallow-faced technician was talking about, but she did remember that several small tremors had been detected in the direction of the Colorado plains. That area was relatively stable—tectonically speaking—so the sudden uptick in activity was interesting, but not considered threatening in any way.

"You sure we're not talking about equipment failure here? It's been a long time ... Can tectonic sensors go bad?"

"They can, but they've passed all the diagnostics," the technician said. "For my money, they're working fine, ma'am."

Baxter didn't know what to make of that. "Okay. Do you think the quakes pose a threat to the base?"

"Oh, no. I wouldn't say that. I just want to make sure someone in the command group is aware of them, that's all. I would usually just log it and let it go, but since it's a

pretty repetitive event,” the technician pointed at one of the graphics on his workstation display, which showed a bar chart of tectonic occurrences over the past few days, “it seems like this is info you might want to look at for yourself, ma’am.”

“Ah. All right, then. Forward the data to my station. I’ll look it over.”

Rosen pressed a button. “Done, ma’am.”

“Thanks.”

Baxter walked back to her station and slid into the high-backed chair. Her shift was over in ten minutes, and she would hand over the task of overseeing base operations to a junior officer while she knocked off for a straight eight. Just the same, she called up the tremor readings on her workstation and reviewed the graphs and the baseline assessment Rosen had conducted. Seismology was certainly not her forte, but the fact was Harmony had been positioned in western Kansas because the area was thought to be tectonically stable. Even if it wasn’t, the base had been designed to survive a near-miss ground strike from a nuclear warhead in the forty megaton range, so she wasn’t very concerned about earthquakes.

She bundled up the data and forwarded it to General Benchley. This was something he should know about.

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Andrews sat at the small dining table in his quarters, drinking a cup of coffee. Rachel was in the shower, and he heard the water splashing across her body as she prepared for another day of work. Usually, a spouse would get a free day or two after an SCEV team had come back from the field, but the cost of the beer was high: Rachel had to cover for a sick coworker as part of the deal. They’d each had one of the beers last night. While they were good—fantastic, actually—Andrews was no longer convinced they were worth the price Rachel was paying for them.

The shower was turned off, and Andrews got up from the table. He brewed another cup of coffee for Rachel and set it down for her, along with a piece of toasted cinnamon bread—plain was how she liked it, which Andrews thought was boring as hell—then slid back into the plastic chair. He didn’t have to wait for long before she emerged from the bathroom, stark naked, a towel wrapped around her hair.

“Morning, sweets!” she said, smiling at him brilliantly. “Sleep well?”

“Like the dead—you really tired me out last night.” Seeing her in such a state of undress caused a flush of heat to surge through his groin. Rachel Andrews, née Lopez, was one of the most beautiful women in Harmony Base, and somehow, Andrews had gotten lucky enough to score her as his wife.

Rachel looked at him and her smile widened. “Uh-huh ... doesn’t look like it to me, mister.” She pointed at his crotch. “If I’m not mistaken, it looks like you’re pitching a tent in your bathrobe.”

Andrews laughed and turned away from her, crossing his legs. Carefully. “Don’t worry, I won’t make you late for work.”

“We’ll see about that. But maybe I’ll get dressed now, just in case.”

“Your call, babe.”

She walked to the bedroom, intentionally shaking her ass a bit, making him laugh. He heard her open the closet in the bedroom and pull out a work uniform, then listened to the rustling noises as she dressed.

"So, what did you find?" she asked from behind the bedroom partition.

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?"

Andrews sipped some more coffee. "All we found were burned-out cities. Collected a ton of scientific data that doesn't mean crap. Put a few thousand miles on the rig, and somehow, we didn't kill each other after more than a month driving around looking for life."

"You didn't find *anything*?" The disappointment was obvious in her voice.

Andrews sighed. "Well, we did find some fortified communities that survived the initial war. But once their supplies were exhausted, they had to abandon them. We don't know what happened to them, but the fortifications were empty." He paused for another sip of coffee. "Cheyenne Mountain's gone. Looks like it was hit with several ground strikes. The area was still way too hot for us to go EVA and check it out."

Rachel walked to the table, fully dressed. She slid into the chair opposite him and looked at Andrews with sad, dark eyes. "So ... we're all that's left?"

Andrews shrugged. "I don't know. We still think the Northwest is the best place to look, but the command staff wants to take baby steps and start local."

"Jim Laird's rig is going to head northeast," Rachel said, sipping her coffee. "Up the Ohio Valley, or something."

Andrews grunted. "Wrong direction, but at least the powers that be are thinking we need to stretch our legs. When did you find that out?"

"His rig was moved into vehicle prep last week. Kelly told me that was the plan."

"Jimmy's a good commander. If there's anything to be found out in that part of the country, he'll find it."

Rachel hesitated. "Kelly also mentioned something else," she said, finally.

"Do tell."

"Word has it that Benchley might create a new staff position. Director of Field Operations."

Andrews snorted. "More management, huh? Hooah, just what this place needs."

Rachel ignored his remark. "Babe, you'd be a natural. You're a great leader, and you have an eye for detail. And it's a base position—limited field time involved."

"Me? A base position? Rachel, you know I'm no paper pusher. I'm still young, and the field work is—"

"Important, I know, I know. Look, Mike, it's been ten years. I think we're *it*. We're all that's left. You're putting yourself at risk for nothing."

Andrews looked at her over the rim of his coffee mug. "We've been through this," he said calmly. "I have a great crew backing me up. As long as I keep my head and don't do anything stupid, the field work's as safe as working in the Core—"

"That's bullshit." The anger was clear in her voice, and her eyes flashed with barely restrained fury. Andrews sighed inwardly. There was no winning this argument, and as long as he remained in command of SCEV Four, he was always going to spend part of his time home bobbing and weaving.

"Rachel, it's *not* bullshit."

"Yeah, right. Would you sing that song if your parents had bought it out in the field? Don't think so, Mike. Don't think so at *all*." She rose, turned to the sink, and fairly flung the remains of her coffee into it. She rinsed her mug as Andrews got to his feet and came up behind her, slipping his arms around her waist.

"That happened when the war was just going down. No one knows the full story—"

"Wake *up*, Michael!" Rachel put her hands on the counter and looked toward the ceiling. She sighed, and Andrews knew it was only a moment or so before she totally blew her top. "Mulligan and Benchley were serving together before we were born! The old timers cover for each other all the time, and you know that!"

Andrews squeezed her and spoke calmly into her ear. "And what does that prove, hon? What does that even mean, if it's true? Nothing. The fact of the matter is, what I do for this installation is as safe as it can be. What happened to your parents is the exception ... not the rule."

"Just because the only fatal rig accident happened over ten years ago doesn't mean it can't happen again. And it sure as hell doesn't mean it can't happen to you." Slowly, she turned inside his arms and looked at him, her brown eyes locking with his blue. She put her arms around his neck. She was cooling off, and Andrews allowed his gut to relax slightly. "Look. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to jump into this right away, I just got carried away."

"Don't apologize. I hear what you're saying. I really do." Andrews pulled her closer and kissed her forehead. "Listen ... I want that northwest recon. If anyone's still alive on this continent, that's where they'll be. After that, if this position you're talking about comes around, I'll speak to Benchley about it. Seriously."

"That would be nice," Rachel said softly.

Andrews kissed her. "I know this hasn't been much of a marriage. All we've had are little honeymoons in between deployments. That's my fault, and I'll try my damndest to change that."

"You might as well. After all, it's the only marriage we've got. Right?"

Andrews smiled at her. "Right."

A chime sounded over the apartment's speaker system, followed by a neutral male voice. "The time is zero six fifty." Rachel sagged into his arms when she heard the announcement.

"Duty calls. I'll see you tonight, okay?" Andrews gave her a big hug.

"You sure will. What'll you do today?"

"Spend some time in the Commons, then head for the SCEV bay and check on the teardown of the rig. That's Spencer's job, but I want to keep my hand in, make sure everything's going as well as it can."

Rachel nodded slowly, her face impassive. She kissed his neck, then broke their embrace. "Well, enjoy it, I guess. I'll catch you at seventeen hundred."

"Okay. I love you, baby."

Rachel headed for the door. "I know you do." She pulled open the heavy door and stepped into the brightly lit corridor. When she turned to pull it closed, she looked at Andrews and smiled. "Get some more rest. I have plans for you later."



“Oh, goody!” Rachel laughed and closed the door. Andrews fairly collapsed into his chair and regarded the cold remnants of coffee in his mug. He put it back on the table and leaned back.

“Welcome home, you stupid jerk,” he said to himself.

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The Core was a huge, three-story chamber in the bottom of the base. The center of the floor was dominated by a wide platform, atop of which sat three wailing turbines contained inside soundproofed compartments that only served to dull the roar. If the personnel inside the base formed its soul, then the turbines were absolutely Harmony’s heart. Without the life-giving power they generated, the base’s inhabitants would have perished long, long ago. As such, the turbines and their associated systems were supported by dozens of technicians, and more were trained on their operations and maintenance every year. It was essential that the turbines remain operational twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. Without them, Harmony Base would cease to exist.

At noontime, Rachel walked across the floor to where Jeremy Andrews stood, talking to another engineer. She stood off to one side and waited to catch her father-in-law’s eye, not wanting to interrupt the conversation. Jeremy looked and scanned the floor, his brow furrowing when he saw Rachel.

Jeremy finished his conversation, then headed toward Rachel. He looked at her with concern written all over his face. “You look like you’ve been put through the wringer. You all right?” Jeremy asked. “All of these shifts are doing you in. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“I’m fine,” Rachel said. Jeremy Andrews was the base’s engineering officer, one of the most senior civilian personnel in the base. Because of that, she had to be perhaps even more diligent in her duties. Despite the fact he was her husband’s father, it wouldn’t do for her coworkers to think she might be using family status to her unfair advantage. Keeping this in mind, she still asked, “Do you have a second? I, um, want to talk to you about something.”

Jeremy smiled, the skin around his eyes crinkling. “Sure—anything to avoid work. You’re on your break, right? Your station’s manned?”

“Full up,” Rachel said.

“Cool. Let’s hit the lounge.”

Jeremy led Rachel to a gangway, and she followed him up its narrow length to the next level. While he was about the same height as his son, Jeremy Andrews was about thirty pounds heavier, and the metal steps creaked slightly beneath his weight as he vaulted up the gangway. Despite his age and the expanding paunch that encircled his belly, he still moved fast, and Rachel had to hurry to keep up with him.

The lounge was located on the Core’s second level. It was a bright room, and the tables and chairs were positioned before the thick windows that overlooked the Core. Rachel was happy to see the room was unoccupied. Jeremy immediately headed for the small refreshment area in one corner and grabbed a mug from a rack on the wall.

“Want a cuppa?” he asked, pointing at the coffee station.

"Sure, that'd be great." She really was tired from working so many double shifts, and the coffee would help her get through the rest of the day.

"Are you scheduled tomorrow?" Jeremy filled two mugs with dark coffee as he spoke.

"No, I'm off. Why?"

"Good. I was going to insist you take the day off. Listen, getting those beers for Mike was great and all, but they're just not worth two weeks of double shifts. Don't do that again. I'll talk to Dominick about it as well—he's a jerk for pushing you into that sort of an agreement. It's great that he can trade for a couple of days off so he can brew more beer, but when he starts pushing people into corners and performance suffers, I'm calling him on it."

"I'm fine, Jeremy. Really."

Jeremy handed her a mug of coffee, and she accepted it gratefully. He raised his own mug to his lips and looked at her for a moment as he sipped it. "You're fine? That's horse crap. You're dead on your feet." Before she could respond, he waved the matter away with one hand. "Anyhow. Most young married people would be doing handstands after their dear mates returned to the fold. Why aren't you?"

"Am I that transparent?"

Jeremy laughed and walked toward the windows. "Not at all, but I've been there. Before Meg died, that is."

He put his hands in his uniform's pockets, and Rachel could see his reflection in the glass. At the mention of his wife—her mother-in-law—who had died from cancer almost three years ago, a vaguely haunted expression flashed across his face. He hadn't wanted her to see it, she knew, but he had been foiled by the glass before him. He turned back to her and smiled easily, all traces of loss and loneliness gone from his face. "And I have an inkling as to what makes my son tick. So ...?"

Rachel sighed and shrugged. "I guess I'm acting like the little wife, as disgusting as it sounds."

"I don't know what that means. I know you probably go through a little or a lot of hell every time Mike takes off in that rig of his. Hell, I get queasy myself. But you know that his work is vital, right? That it's part of the core reasons for this base's existence?"

"Yeah, I'm up on all that. It's still a tough thing for me to deal with, and it screws up every homecoming. I just can't stop myself from trying to convince him to try his hand at something else. Even / realize what a nag I've turned into, so it must be ten times worse on the receiving end."

"The answer's easy—stop."

"I can't."

He sipped more coffee as she joined him at the window. "Then you're going to have a hell of a fight on your hands. I know Mike. He acts loose and easy all the time, but the fact of the matter is, he has one stiff neck. You try and bend it, he's going to stand up and give it back to you one day, and that won't be pretty." He paused. "But your position is absolutely understandable, given what you've gone through."

"Thanks. He thinks so, too. But he's convinced himself the rigs are the safest things around—"

"They are," a deep, rough voice said. Rachel's heart seemed to freeze in her chest, and if she hadn't been caught by surprise, she would have kept her gaze rooted on the turbine platform below. Unfortunately, she turned.

A tall, imposing man stood in the break room's corridor doorway, his pale eyes fixed on hers like he was tracking a target. He had a hard-edged, handsome face, bordering on old movie-star looks, but it seemed lived-in, a facade covering up decades of Rachel didn't know what. Command Sergeant Major Scott Mulligan was the base's senior enlisted man and a contemporary of the Old Guard—a relic.

Jeremy jumped in quickly. "Mulligan! What brings you to our cherished inner sanctum?"

Mulligan turned his inscrutable gaze toward the burly engineer. "My feet, of course." He raised the notepad he held in one hand. "It's time to go through the quarterly physical security review, which is on your calendar, Major."

"I thought that was tomorrow," Jeremy said.

"I guarantee you it's today, sir. And it'll be as routine as always—I'll ask you the same boring questions, you give me the same boring answers, we'll review the same boring data, and finally, we'll both sign the same boring attestation forms."

"Doesn't get any more exciting than that, does it?" Jeremy ran a hand over his face, then nodded to the tall sergeant major. "All right, then. Let's get to it." He put a hand on Rachel's shoulder. "Can we continue this later?"

"Sure," Rachel said, and she put her coffee mug in the sink. She couldn't get out of there fast enough.

"If it makes you feel any easier, Andrews, I can confirm for you that what Captain Andrews says is completely true—the SCEVs are about as bulletproof as any mobile system can be," Mulligan said to her as she turned for the door.

Rachel broke stride. It was rare for Mulligan to address her; the big enlisted man was usually too aloof to interact in a meaningful way with the New Guard, the people like herself and her husband who'd been brought to the base as children before the war. Now he had done so twice in rapid succession, and it provided Rachel with a sudden opportunity.

"Is that so, Sergeant Major? What's it like to kill people in them?" The sudden snarl in her voice surprised her. Like so many others, on some level she *feared* Mulligan. He was too different; he embodied too much legacy. He was an example of what had gone wrong in the world before the Sixty Minute War, a complete anachronism whose uniform still sported the patches of Army Special Forces. Everyone was on their toes around Mulligan, even members of the command staff, so when Rachel suddenly faced him down, she was perhaps the most shocked of all.

There was no backing down now. She stared at Mulligan, who stared back at her without any display of emotion. The moment dragged on, and Mulligan kept quiet until Jeremy opened his mouth to speak.

"It's not as easy as you might think," Mulligan said finally.

The bland response unnerved her and, for a moment, Rachel was afraid she might burst into tears. Instead, she managed to hold them back long enough to fix the tall soldier with a withering glare. If he recognized the hatred she felt for him, Mulligan

gave no indication. His only response was to look back at her with his usual flat, disinterested gaze.

Finally, he turned back to Jeremy. "We should get to work, Major."

Rachel stormed out of the break room and back into the never-ending din of the Core. She bolted down the narrow gangway, shoving past a burly electrician plodding up the metal stairs. The man had to flatten himself against the bulkhead so she could get past, and Rachel jostled him mightily. She would apologize to the electrician later. Right now, she needed to get to the restroom on the main floor and hide in a stall, so no one could see her tears.

**A**FTER HAVING BREAKFAST in the Commons Area, Andrews rode one of the elevators to the SCEV Maintenance Area. Virtually as wide as the entire base below it, “the bay,” as it was called, was the single largest room in the installation, housing Harmony’s remaining nine Self-Contained Exploration Vehicles. The tenth rig had been lost in the immediate aftermath of the Sixty Minute War under circumstances that remained unclear, though Andrews had of course heard the rumors that placed the blame squarely on Scott Mulligan’s shoulders. The fact that Rachel’s parents had perished in the same incident was not lost upon him, but Andrews wasn’t about the past. He let Mulligan and Benchley and even his own father dance with that. Andrews was all about the future.

One portion of the bay was dedicated to assembly and repair, and SCEVs Four and Five were already there. Andrews made a beeline for his vehicle just as a ceiling-mounted crane lifted the bulky Mission Equipment Pack from the vehicle’s back. The MEP was what made the SCEVs tick; loaded with all manner of sensors, a low-slung radome that housed a millimeter-wave radar, and a retractable pod that held six AGM-114R Hellfire missiles, the MEP had been designed to be modular. That way, a pack could be taken from one vehicle and attached to another should the rig’s original pack have a systems failure. Removal of the pack after decontamination was also the first step in performing rig maintenance, and Andrews was not surprised to see Todd Spencer overseeing the operation. Standing with his feet spread and hands on his hips, Spencer struck a pose that was almost dictatorial. He shouted at the crane operator and the technicians who mounted the MEP to the crane, reminding them that they were handling millions of dollars of equipment—which would probably be worth billions now, if currency still had any value.

“Sergeant Spencer! Don’t you crew chiefs ever sleep?” Andrews asked as he stopped beside the engineer and looked up at the MEP dangling from its truss.

Spencer only glanced at him. “*Buenos días, Capitan*. Yeah, I caught a straight eight after we rolled in. I wanted to get cracking on that engine you guys blew. ’Scuse me for a second ...” Spencer hurried over to where another maintenance technician was prying open an access panel on the SCEV’s fuselage. “Hey, McCready! What’re you doing? Since when do you just *pry* open an access point like that? You’re going to bend the plate!”

Andrews watched as Spencer harangued the tech about the proper procedure required to open access plates, pointing out that said procedure was even written on the surface of the plate itself. Andrews shook his head. Spencer could be a little too much at times.

“Hey, Mike! Welcome back!”

Andrews took a slap to the back that was hard enough to make him take a step forward. He whirled around, startled. Jim Laird, the commander of SCEV Five, clapped his hands together as he snickered.

"Man, you should see the look on your face!"

"Kiss my ass, Jimmy. You scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry, sorry. How's it going?" Laird stuck out his hand, and Andrews shook it. Laird was about an inch taller than Andrews, and while Andrews could be described as broad-shouldered, Jim Laird was built like an old-time linebacker. And where Andrews was definitely Caucasian, Laird was anything but. "Philly black," he'd said about his ethnicity when they were kids.

"Tried to catch up to you yesterday, but you'd already made it back to quarters," Laird continued. "I figured I'd wait. Didn't want to interrupt anything important and have Rachel boot me in the nuts."

"Probably a good choice," Andrews agreed. "How're you doing, man?"

"Fair to middlin'. Getting ready to head up to Minnesota and see what we can see." Laird nodded to SCEV Five. The rig Laird commanded was an identical twin to Andrews's, the only difference being a black number 5 painted on its white fuselage. "Should be a couple of weeks of wall-to-wall excitement."

"There's lots of storm activity all across the Midwest," Andrews said. "Get ready for it. How far up do you think you'll go?"

"All the way to the Canadian border, if we can make it."

"Damn, guy. You go!"

Laird smiled. "As far and as fast as I can, pal." He paused. "So, scuttlebutt is you guys rolled snake eyes."

"Why, Captain Laird, I'm surprised at that statement. You know the command group will release the findings of my last mission in due time," Andrews said, tongue firmly in cheek.

"Come on, guy, throw me a bone here."

Andrews chuckled. It was true, he was technically not allowed to discuss his mission's findings with other personnel, but that regulation was regularly ignored every time an SCEV crew returned to the fold. That Laird already knew the mission was a wash less than a day after SCEV Four's return certainly indicated someone was chattering. Andrews took Laird by the elbow and led him several yards away from the two rigs.

"We found jack shit," Andrews said, turning back to watch the two SCEVs, one being torn down after a mission, the other being readied to jump into the field. "We found a couple of strongholds, but they'd been abandoned years ago. Even the best prepared survivalist couldn't hold out for a decade."

"You find bodies at those sites?"

Andrews nodded. "At some, yeah."

"But not at all of them?"

"We only found three, Jim. Two were full of bodies, the last one was empty ... but it *had* been occupied. Plenty of signs of habitation. They must've taken off for greener pastures, but no idea where they went. Or if they survived."

Laird was silent for a moment. "Well, maybe they made it. Maybe they headed northwest."

Andrews shrugged. "No evidence to show that, but yeah, maybe they did. The only way to crack that nut is to actually go there. I brought it up to Benchley again yesterday, but it doesn't seem like he's going to go for it. At least, not yet."

"Keep at it, man. You're the guy with the inside—"

The floor lurched beneath their feet, and Andrews staggered slightly. Laird reached out and grabbed his arm, but whether to steady Andrews or himself, he didn't know. Overhead, the chamber's ceiling creaked ominously, and SCEV Four's MEP swung from the crane like a pendulum. Andrews stumbled again as another jolt ran through the bay; the emergency lights flickered on and off, even though the main lights remained steady. Spencer started yelling at the crane operator, shouting for him to drop the MEP back on the SCEV. The technicians holding the MEP's guidelines looked amongst themselves as the base seemed to sway beneath their feet, the movements growing more forceful by the second.

*What the fuck is going on?*

"It's an earthquake," Laird said, as if reading his mind. "Oh, man, we're going through an earthquake in *Kansas!*"

Andrews looked around the prep area, listening to the creaks and groans of stressed superstructure that only grew louder. The vehicle elevator doors warped and flexed in their frame; a moment later, the frame itself seemed to undulate, twisting right to left amid the cacophonous rending of metal.

*Oh, man ...*

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The Core exploded into chaos. Alarms blared as the base rocked on its shock-absorbing system, a series of gigantic fluid-filled cylinders designed to aid the base in surviving a near-miss from a nuclear ground strike. The absorption system was very much on Jeremy Andrews's mind as he slogged to his workstation. Could they survive an actual earthquake, one that continued on for more than just a handful of seconds? He suspected he was about to find out.

He slipped on his headset and immediately starting barking orders. "Let's get all the stations secure! Spool down turbine three, relegate it to standby status! Davies, Kadaka, get me the numbers on the well!"

All around the Core, technicians staggered to their stations or fought to maintain their footing. He heard metal tear, followed by an explosion of steam. Above the creaking and rumbling, someone screamed, and Jeremy looked up in time to see a figure flying through the air amidst a rapidly expanding cloud of steam. A steam pipe had exploded, the force of the explosion blowing one of his engineers right off the third level. As he watched, Benny Okabe fell to the bottom floor, arms pin-wheeling. Jeremy could see his face plainly, and his expression was blank. Okabe landed on the other side of the turbines, and Jeremy was thankful the turbine housing was tall enough that he couldn't see the impact.

A klaxon wailed, loud and strident above the din of the earthquake rattling the base like a child's toy. Either someone had hit the emergency cutoff on the turbine platform, or the Core's AI had initiated an automatic shutdown of the three systems independently. He looked down and was surprised to see he had done it himself—he didn't remember lifting the plastic shield and throwing the red switch beneath it. It was too late. One of the turbine housings tore loose from its mounts and rocked back and forth; from inside it, several crashing explosions could be heard above the racket as the turbine array destroyed itself, its rotating components disintegrating as they contacted the housing's interior.

Then the main lights went out. Several people cried out in shock and fear as sudden darkness descended upon the great chamber—he was one of them. The emergency systems snapped on, bathing the area in pale, tepid illumination. There was another series of concussive blasts, and he could feel them this time. Jeremy clung to his console as the floor beneath his feet continued to undulate. He looked around, peering into the shadows where the illumination from the emergency lights couldn't penetrate. Was there smoke coming from the battery room?

The flames that erupted from the room confirmed Jeremy's suspicions. Another alarm sounded as the fire suppression system activated, blasting the room with heavy, dust-like fire retardant. But it wasn't working.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the violent, side-to-side jerking subsided. If it wasn't for the alarms, the emergency lights, and the acrid, deadly smoke filling the air from the battery room, it might have seemed that the earthquake had never happened.

"Secure the battery room door!" Jeremy shouted as another of the battery units suddenly exploded, causing more people to cry out in terror.

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The command center was a pit of confusion illuminated by red emergency lights. Major General Martin Benchley clung to his workstation even after the earthquake had subsided, shaking in fear. The base creaked and groaned in the void left by the earthquake, and Benchley looked around the room. Several operators and technicians had taken cover beneath their workstations, cowering in their foot wells. Alarms rang. Displays flashed a series of situational alerts, and Benchley looked at the screens on his own workstation. The turbines were offline, and the base was operating on emergency power only.

*Snap out of it! Get in the game!*

"Operations!"

"Go for Ops, sir," said Cheadle, the officer manning the ops console.

"Let's get standard light restored, then tell me how badly we're hurt. Damage control teams need to get out and start making their assessments. Reports go to Colonel Baxter, ASAP."

"Roger that, sir."

"Is anyone in the center injured?" Benchley rose to his feet, pushing aside his fear. He had to show everyone the Old Man was still playing his A-game, and no one was



going to listen to anything he had to say while he was clutching his workstation like it was his mother's apron strings. He looked around the command center as the lights suddenly brightened. Several bulbs flickered for a moment, then shone bright and strong. Benchley sighed in relief that no one seemed hurt.

"Cory, are you all right?" he asked Baxter. She had fallen to the floor on the other side of his workstation. A small cut on her dark cheek oozed blood, and he reached for her. Baxter shrugged off his hand and smiled tightly.

"Still operational, sir," she said.

"Sir, I have a preliminary report," the operations technician said.

"Let's hear it."

"The base is running on auxiliary power only. We've got enough juice for lights and air, but that's about it."

That wasn't what Benchley wanted to hear. "What's the word from the Core? When will primary power be restored?"

"I'm trying to get a hold of someone down in the Core, but there are several fire alerts down there. I think they're pretty busy, sir."

Benchley looked at the situation display on his workstation. Sure enough, several fire sensors had been tripped in the Core, and several more throughout the base. There were fire indicators illuminated on each of the installation's seven floors.

"All right, let's wait for the damage control teams to report in. Any word from medical?" he asked Baxter.

"Nothing yet, sir."

Benchley grunted. He feared what news the coming hours might bring.

**E**VEN THOUGH THE main elevator wasn't working, Andrews and the others managed to escape the SCEV prep area through a stairway that led to the next level of Harmony Base. Emergency lights glared in the gloom, and intercom announcements were strident but informative: There had been an earthquake; engineering was working on restoring essential power; seriously injured personnel were to be transported directly to the base's medical section on level three; all non-essential personnel were to return to their quarters or the Commons Area on level three and await further taskings.

"Guess that's us," Laird said. "Unless someone needs an SCEV at the moment."

"Sounds like," Andrews said. They were on level two, the first floor beneath the SCEV bay. Despite the fact it was an admin level, it was buzzing with activity. Several injured personnel were being carried down the corridor on stretchers. The elevators were under inspection, so they were out of commission. That meant the injured had to be transported down the four stairways located in each corner of the floor.

"I'm headed for the Commons. What about you?" Laird said.

"The Core. Rachel was on shift."

Laird made a sound of commiseration. "Damn. I'll go with you."

Andrews waved the notion away. "Nah, don't worry about it. I'm sure she's fine, but I'm going to head down there and check things out. Gives me the opportunity to heckle the old man, too."

"You sure?"

Andrews nodded and slapped Laird on the shoulder. "I'm cool, man. Really."

Laird looked at him levelly for a long moment, then returned his nod. "Okay. If you need me, I'll be in either the Commons or my quarters."

"Hooah," Andrews said. They hurried back into the stairwell. Laird peeled off on level three, heading for the huge Commons Area, Harmony Base's main social and dining hub. Andrews pressed on, pushing past people coming up from the base's lower floors. Several were injured, many were near panic, and all of them had drawn-out expressions of grim foreboding etched into their faces. No one had been prepared for an event like this, and Andrews felt exactly the same way.

It took almost an hour to get down to level five, which was where the uppermost level of the Core could be accessed. Security guards turned him away, informing him the area was currently off-limits to anyone without an engineering specialty. They knew who he was, of course, and that his father was the base's engineering officer, but still they refused him admittance.

"I just want to know if my family's safe," Andrews told the senior trooper guarding the fifth floor entrance to the Core.

"I know your father is all right," the soldier said. "I saw him myself. I don't know about your wife though, Captain. Sorry. All section commands are supposed to be posting casualty lists, so ..." The soldier shrugged and looked over at the second guard for verification.

"That's probably the best thing you can do right now, sir," the other soldier agreed.

Andrews looked past their shoulders, but there was little to see. People were coming and going from the Core; those leaving were injured or heading to other parts of the base with toolkits and spares in hand, while those entering were apparently hurrying in to supplement the remaining workforce. There was the acrid hint of smoke in the air, a particularly foul-smelling, chemical sort.

"Do me a favor, guys ... You see Rachel Andrews, tell her I'm fine and I'll be in the Commons. You know who she is, right?"

"Oh, yeah," the first guard said. "We'll tell her if we see her, sir. Don't worry. Same message to your father?"

"Roger that. I'd appreciate it."

"Consider it done, sir."

Andrews nodded and reluctantly turned away from the doorway. He briefly considered going down to the sixth floor and trying his luck there, but it probably wouldn't work. The guards had their hands full already; they didn't need some junior officer trying to bull his way past them when they had orders.

So Andrews joined the procession of people moving up the stairs, pressing himself against the wall when damage control or medical teams came past, granting them priority access. It usually only took a minute or two to get to the Commons level, but due to the crush of bodies and their slow gait, it took ten minutes. It was perhaps the longest ten minutes of his life, and Andrews felt a particularly furious sort of irritation blossom in his chest. While he was no stranger to impatience, he was used to being in control of himself, being capable of reining in his emotions before they got the best of him. It was something all of the New Guard had to become familiar with. Being raised underground and told they were humanity's last hope and the seeds for a new United States of America, patience was something that had been inculcated in them from their earliest years. While the Old Guard wrestled with claustrophobia, boredom, and even outright hostility, the New Guard was able to look past those things and face the future with a calm, even gaze. The Old Guard couldn't do that, at least not as reliably as the younger people. The Old Guard had grown up in wide open spaces with lovely blue skies. The only clouds that came their way sprinkled rain or snow, not radioactive particles that could damage cellular reproduction and cause uncontrollable cancers.

Andrews sensed a strong undercurrent of frustration running through the crowd. Only a few hours ago, everyone had been carrying on with their subterranean lives, hoping and praying the SCEV teams would find other pockets of life that Harmony Base could work with to rebuild the nation. Now, that mission seemed to be a very distant goal. Survival was once again at the fore.

When he finally stepped into the Commons Area, he wasn't surprised to find it packed tight with people. Even though it had been designed to accommodate virtually the entire base, it was rare for so many people to be in the cavernous room at one time. As he walked through the crowd, occasionally acknowledging someone he

knew, he decided it wasn't as packed as he'd initially thought. There was still enough room to move about, so long as he was careful and took care not to stomp on someone's foot or get hit with a chair as someone stood up from a table.

"Mike!"

Andrews turned. Leona Eklund pushed toward him through the crowd, her lean, athletic frame giving her more than enough dexterity to wend her way through the occasional mass of bodies and, when required, the power to shove her way past. Like himself, she'd been brought to the base at a very young age—four years old, to be exact. Now nineteen, she served as his executive officer and was commissioned as a first lieutenant in the United States Army. Her curly dark hair hung free around her shoulders, and her narrow-featured face turned his way, her deep brown eyes locked on him. Someone—one of the Old Guard, he remembered—had mentioned to him once that Leona was built like a saluki, lean and all angles. Andrews had had to look it up, but he found that a saluki was a breed of dog built for racing. He agreed with the description. Leona did seem to possess the same poise as the dogs he had seen in the videos.

"Lee, you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm good. What about you?"

Andrews shrugged. "Tried to get down to the Core, but it's under lockdown. I heard my dad's all right, but don't know anything about Rachel yet."

She looked at him for a long moment. "I'm sorry about that. It must be terrible."

Andrews shrugged, wondering if the worry was as visible on his face as he feared it might be. "I'll make do," he said lamely. "You see anyone else from the team?"

She nodded. "Everyone's accounted for, except for you and Spencer."

"He's fine. We were in the SCEV prep area when the quake hit. They'd just started pulling our rig apart. I'm glad it wasn't on the elevator—it looks like it got whacked big time. The doors practically collapsed inward."

"Sounds bad. Did Five leave?"

"No, not yet. Both rigs are still in the prep area."

Leona nodded and started to say something else, but the screens surrounding the Commons came to life. A shiver ran through the assembled people, and everyone turned to the nearest screen. Andrews was no different; his heart started to race, and he and Leona both turned to stare at the closest screen. The casualty reports were in alphabetical order, so Andrews didn't have long to wait. There was no listing for "Rachel Andrews." He didn't allow himself to fully relax until the listing progressed through the Ls and there was no "Rachel Lopez," either. When he saw that, he released his breath in a trembling sigh.

*The list is going to be continually updated, he told himself. Just because she's not on it now, doesn't mean she won't be on it later.*

Adding a small cast of desperation to his thought was that there were almost thirty names on the list. Thirty names, and he knew them all. Thirty people who had been killed during the earthquake. He had grown up with four of them, and one of them, a woman named Sally Kesserman, had been one of his dearest friends when they were younger. He remembered that at first, they played long games of tag in the base, stealing off to areas few adults could get into as they hid from each other and giggling

in the darkness, the antiseptic corridors of Harmony Base infected by the sounds of their running feet. Only three quarters of the base was inhabited, so it gave them lots of space to play in, and Andrews remembered they had actually gotten lost twice in the labyrinthine installation. Then later, when they began to mature, they discarded the games kids played and spent the time just talking, just hanging out with each other. While they had never been mutually attracted to each other, the friendship they developed was a strong one.

But over the decade that had passed since the Sixty Minute War, Andrews had watched Sally grow up. She had become a serious-minded woman, a quartermaster's assistant, her brow always furrowed by the rate at which the base's consumables disappeared. While Andrews was in charge of connecting the base with any outside settlements that might exist, her job was to remain below ground and count beans. She was in charge of worrying, something she'd never had a penchant for when she was younger.

Other than meaningless chitchat, Andrews hadn't kept up with her for the past several years. That he would never have the opportunity to talk to his old friend again left him feeling hollow and guilty.

"So many," Leona said, her voice soft. Sobs broke out around the Commons. In such a small community, the loss of thirty people meant that everyone had lost someone. The bottom had just dropped out of several people's lives. Andrews looked around numbly. He felt it, too.

*Oh, Sally ...*

He looked at Leona, her face tightly drawn. She had always been a super-confident sort, the type of person who never let her true feelings show. He remembered when she was maybe twelve years old, when she and her family had arrived at the base. The rest of the kids would sometimes make fun of her gawky figure, thin features, and lank hair. If the teasing had ever bothered her, she'd never given any of them the satisfaction of seeing it. As he grew older, Andrews found he admired her for that trait, which he himself had never been able to master. But even Leona had her limits, and the sudden notice that thirty people had checked out for the long dirt nap had pushed her past them. Tears glittered in her eyes as she continued to stare at the displays. Andrews put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. She stiffened at the sudden contact, but Andrews kept his arm around her to let her know she wasn't alone in her grief.

"You all right?" he asked.

Leona relaxed suddenly. She bowed her head, as if embarrassed by her tears, and tried to hide them by wiping the back of her hand across her eyes. "Yeah, I'm okay. I just wasn't expecting there to be so *many*."

Andrews looked at the scrolling fatality list and wondered idly at its power. Millions had died well in advance of these thirty, but it was these thirty that he knew. In the grand scale of things, the passing of thirty souls could perhaps be considered inconsequential. But in the small community of Harmony Base, it was as if an entire nation had just been ripped asunder.

"Hang in there, Lieutenant," he said. "Just hang in there."

Leona raised her head and looked at him, a bit of the old fire back in her eyes. "Because it's probably going to get worse, right?"

"It might," he agreed softly. "It just might."

Leona nodded and looked back at the displays. She reached up and touched his hand, the one that was still wrapped around her shoulder. "Thanks for this, but you don't want anyone to get the wrong idea."

Andrews smiled lamely and released her. "I don't think anyone even noticed."

"I know. Thanks for helping." She flashed him a sudden smile. "Really."

"Free of charge."

"Andrews," a voice called from behind him. "You need to come with me right now."

Andrews turned as Colonel Larry Walters stepped up beside him. He was shorter than Andrews by quite a bit and, true to his nickname, the colonel was in fact somewhat wall-eyed; his left eye wandered a bit off-center, enough so that it was difficult for people to know which eye to look at while they were speaking to him. He was a small-boned sort, and his steel gray hair was cropped so close to his skull that Andrews wondered why Walters never went for broke and just shaved it bare.

"Sir?" Andrews said automatically, even though he had heard Walters perfectly. The truth was, his heart had skipped a beat. Why was Walters here? Had something happened to Rachel? Had he come to find Andrews before her name was released on the casualty list?

"I need you to come with me," Walters said again, impatiently. He looked past Andrews. "You too, Eklund. Follow me."

"Where to, Colonel?" Leona asked.

He fixed her with his imprecise stare. "Follow. Me." He turned and pushed through the crowd without saying anything else. Andrews nodded at Leona, and he headed after the bantam officer as quickly as he could.

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Andrews was surprised to find Walters had led them to the commander's conference room. That the room was full was no shock—the base had just been hit by what appeared to be a major catastrophe, and he expected all the senior department heads to be present. What he didn't expect was for Jim Laird and his exec, Kelly Jordello, to be in attendance, any more than he would expect Leona and himself to be summoned. What did SCEV teams have to do with the earthquake?

"Andrews and Eklund, sir," Walter said as he stepped into the room. General Benchley sat at the head of the long table opposite the entrance, and he made eye contact with Andrews and Leona as they entered. It was standing room only. From the corner of his eye, Andrews saw Rachel sitting at the far end of the table.

"Very well," Benchley said. "There's not a lot of room left, so you folks come in as best as you can."

"You heard him, get yourselves squared away," Walters said. He folded his arms and leaned against the wall beside the door. Andrews and Leona pushed themselves inside and grabbed a patch of wall to lean against.

"Jeremy, if you could get started, please," Benchley said.

Beside him sat Sergeant Major Mulligan, and Andrews thought the big Green Beret didn't look happy. He was practically crushed against the edge of the conference table, and the look of utter disdain on his face was priceless. Andrews might have smiled at the sight if Mulligan hadn't looked in his direction. He turned and looked over toward Rachel. She smiled at him vaguely.

The far wall illuminated suddenly; it was actually a huge LED monitor. A vector graphic diagram of Harmony Base appeared on the display. Overall, the representation was in green, but several areas of the base were red. Andrews saw one of those areas was the SCEV bay, where the rigs were stored when not in use. The prep area above the bay was still mostly green.

"All right, folks. As most of you know, several areas of the base have been badly damaged. Most notably, the geothermal exchange system and the auxiliary power cells, here and here." Andrews watched as his father walked up to the display and tapped the indicated areas. "We're operating under emergency conservation procedures, which gives us essential systems power for eight days, max. After that, we're on lifeline support, but without the batteries, we're not looking at much more than another five days or so before the CO2 levels reach critical. In short, we'll all suffocate down here unless we can get the main systems back online.

"The supports that hold the heat exchanger pumps in place were damaged by the earthquake, leaving them without any reliable stabilization. When those units are operational they vibrate quite a bit, and without the supports, the conversion pumps would be smashed to pieces against the sides of the shaft."

Jeremy manipulated a control on the remote, and the display changed to show a graphic of the heat exchange system located almost a mile beneath the base. A long shaft had been bored into the Earth's crust to where the planet's molten core provided enough heat to turn water into steam. That steam was then pumped under pressure to the turbines in the Core, providing them with the necessary fuel to power Harmony Base. The steam would condense back into water, which was then replaced in the ground, ensuring the cycle of availability was more or less continuous. Even though he wasn't one of the base's powerheads, Andrews knew all about it. After all, his father was in charge of maintaining the system and had architected improvements in the few years before the Sixty Minute War shut the door on everything topside.

"These supports were designed to meet exacting tolerances, and their operational lifespan is supposed to be a century or more. They're very dense, and due to their metallurgical properties, they're not something we can manufacture in one of our machine shops. We don't have the foundry skills to do it."

"So what's the big reveal?" Mulligan asked. Benchley cast a glance at him, but the sergeant major gave no indication he noticed. Jeremy sighed and clasped his hands behind his back.

"The big reveal is this, Sergeant Major: if we don't get replacements, we can't turn on the geothermal exchange pumps. And without those pumps operational, there's precious little power to scrub the air, run the water, or operate the lights. In short, we're kind of fucked."

Colonel Baxter rubbed her forehead. "Mister Andrews, that sounds kind of extreme."

"It's an extreme set of circumstances, ma'am."

"But this base was designed to withstand a near ground-strike from a nuclear weapon," Baxter said. "How could an earthquake result in this much critical damage?"

"A nuclear strike is pretty much a short-lived event, Colonel," Jeremy said. "The earthquake discharged even more energy than a nuclear weapon over a greater period of time, albeit over a much larger area. As such, the base was going to take one in the snot locker. We just didn't expect it to take out our teeth with one punch, as it were."

"These supports ... we don't have replacements? It seems like something of this nature, a component that's critical to the survival of the base, should be in our supply chain somewhere."

"That made sense in the 1980s, ma'am. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, this installation wasn't exactly considered a primary project any longer. Interest in it was renewed after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the base went through some substantial refurbishing to bring it up to date. But the general architecture of the geothermal exchange system was left untouched. We've done some modifications to make things more efficient here and there, but overall, the system is still using technology from the 1980s. And since the supports were designed with such a long lifespan, the replacements were never shipped."

"Are there replacements, sir?" Mulligan asked.

Jeremy hesitated for a long moment. He looked down the length of the table at Benchley. The general sighed loudly and ran a hand over his steel gray hair.

"Tell them," he said.

"There were," Jeremy answered. "I mean, as far as I know, there still are. In California."

The assemblage took in its collective breath and released it in one long sigh.

"California." Mulligan's voice still sounded flat, even over the din of the restive group. "As in, the Beach Boys' California?"

"That's the only one I know of," Jeremy said.

Mulligan snorted and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his barrel chest.

"And this is why we're here," Benchley said, looking around the room. He made eye contact with everyone. "This installation has just gone through an extremely powerful event, one that rivals the lethality of the Sixty Minute War. Actually, it casts even that circumstance in deep shadow. As you've just heard from Mister Andrews, Harmony Base is now faced with the possibility that the earthquake might very well be a terminal event." He paused to let that sink in for a moment. "We've already lost people. We may lose more in the coming hours. And if we don't act quickly, we might lose everything inside of two weeks."

"You need us to go out and secure replacements," Andrews said suddenly.

Benchley turned to him and nodded. "Correct, Captain. As it stands, SCEVs Four and Five are the only rigs in the rig prep area. The lift to the SCEV bay is currently out of commission, and best estimates are that it will take more than a day to repair. So those two vehicles are going out into the field to secure replacement supports." He pressed a button on a desktop controller, and the wall display changed to show a



route from Harmony's position in western Kansas to San Jose, California. "I realize that Four has just come back in from the field and was in the beginning stages of post-mission teardown. Obviously, the rig will be reassembled after the more pressing maintenance items are tended to. Once completed, both vehicles will depart as soon as possible for California. Andrews, you'll serve as mission commander. Captain Laird will serve as mission deputy commander. Eklund and Jordello will remain rig XOs. You will be accompanied by Engineer Spencer, Mission Specialist Choi, and Missus Andrews here, who is familiar with the supports." Benchley nodded toward Rachel, sitting at the far end of the table next to Jeremy.

Andrews blinked. "Uh, sir, she isn't qualified for field work, and we won't have time to train her up—"

Benchley held up one hand, cutting him off. "I understand your dilemma, Captain, but I want someone on hand who can not only identify the supports, but also identify which ones are good and which ones are bad. Bringing back defective parts isn't an option. We won't have another chance at a do-over." The general paused. "I'm also adding Command Sergeant Major Mulligan to the mission roster."

Mulligan's eyes widened. "General, I'm an instructor—"

"—who is fully current in SCEV operations, and in light of your Special Forces background, I feel it's prudent you go." Benchley faced Mulligan directly. "Any questions on that, Sergeant Major?"

Mulligan glared at Benchley for a long moment, then slowly shook his head. "Good to go here, General."

"Excuse me, sir?" Kelly Jordello, Laird's executive officer, spoke up. She was short and curvy, with long blond hair she kept tied back from her face. A vivacious sort, she was full of energy and had been something of a tomboy in her youth, a quality that had attracted Andrews to her in their teen years. He'd tried to woo her, but it had all been for naught. Kelly's preference was for other women, and while such a revelation was hardly enough to raise even an eyebrow in the base's small society, Andrews had been heartbroken for a month when she finally rebuffed him. But as they grew older, they developed a casual, low-maintenance friendship that made up for their embarrassing past.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"You've named only eight crewmembers. You *are* assigning more faces for the spaces, right?"

"Negative on that. Should one vehicle become disabled, then the second rig can take on the remaining crew without overloading its life support systems. I know half-crews will increase everyone's workload, but it's unavoidable. Colonel Walters will provide the required electronic navigation updates for both rigs, and he has already ordered every available vehicle engineer and crew chief to the prep area to assist with rig stand-up and certification. Andrews, you and Laird will be responsible for ensuring all tier one safety checks are completed, but I encourage you to skip the nonessentials in order to take to the field as quickly as possible. Understood?"

Andrews looked at Laird, and the other commander nodded his assent. "Roger that, sir. We'll try and streamline things as much as we can."

Benchley nodded. "I appreciate that. I understand this is a sudden thing to drop on you. Normally we spend months planning each jump into the field, but I'm sure you understand we have no choice here. I wish I could provide you with more information, but we have nothing further. Get your affairs in order—you'll be leaving as soon as possible. Colonel Walters will be your conduit to the command group for any last minute issues. I know everyone has a great deal of work to do, so if there's nothing else, you're all dismissed to tend to your tasks."

The assemblage stirred to life. Andrews stepped out of the conference room and waited in the corridor. Leona followed him, and he turned to her.

"You mind heading up to the prep bay and checking in with Spencer? Make sure he knows what's going on, and that he has everything he needs. Remember, we had a twitchy differential. Let's get that replaced and tested. As soon as the rig is put back together, start a full component test. I want even the line replaceable units bench-tested. All right?"

"Got it," Leona said. "Anything else?"

Andrews looked past her shoulder as Rachel emerged from the conference room. Her uniform was covered in grime; clearly, she'd been busy on some sort of repair before she'd been pulled into the conference. Leona followed his gaze, then looked back at him.

"I'll see you later," she said, and headed down the corridor.

Andrews looked at Rachel and, from her expression, he could see she knew he wasn't happy that she'd been assigned to the mission.

"So ... now I get to see you at work, huh?" She smiled sheepishly.

"Don't be so damn sure," he said. "There's got to be someone else who can be assigned to this. You can't be the only person who can tell us not to bring back a rusty support."

"There's more to it than that, and Jeremy is the one who selected me. Listen, I'm not exactly thrilled to leave right now. There's a lot that has to be done, and going on a road trip through post-apocalyptic America was always pretty low on my to-do list."

Jeremy stepped out of the conference room, staring at his data tablet with a frown. He looked up when Andrews grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the exit. His frown deepened.

"Save it, Mike. I know what you're going to say. Rachel's the best asset to validate \_\_\_\_"

"Dad, she doesn't know jack about SCEV ops, and she's terrified of them. You know that. Asking her to saddle up with the rest of us is *majorly* away from goodness."

Jeremy sighed, and he glared at Andrews angrily. "Stop bitching about it. This is how it's going to be played, Mike. I'm sorry if you find this personally inconvenient, but we don't exactly have a lot of choices here. Benchley asked for the best person available to ensure that good replacements are brought back, and that person just happens to be Rachel." He looked at her. "You're good with this?"

"Mostly," she said. "I'll do whatever you need me to do, Jeremy."

Jeremy looked back at Andrews. "Any further questions, Captain?"

Andrews sighed. "No, sir."

Jeremy relaxed a little bit, and he squeezed his son's shoulder. "I know it's asking a lot of you, and I know that adding Rachel to the mix is going to make it tough for both of you personally. But there's no choice in the matter, so you might want to try and make it as easy as possible by making sure she gets spooled up on the broad strokes of SCEV operations. All right?"

"Yes, sir," Andrews said. There was no use fighting it. His father was right, and the stakes were high. Better to just soldier on and get it done.

"Good," Jeremy said. His tablet pinged, and he had another crisis to tend to.

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In the conference room, Benchley took a moment to compose himself before the next session started. He still had a slew of damage reports to go through, and the road ahead looked bleak and desultory. He noticed Mulligan beside him at the table, staring at him with his dark gaze. "Is there something I can do for you, Sergeant Major?" Benchley asked.

"Field duty, sir? *Me?*"

"You'll be needed, Mulligan."

"How so? I haven't been in the field for over ten years, sir. I'm an old geezer. And Rachel Andrews happens to hate my guts for—"

"And whose fault is that?" Benchley asked, irritation plain in his voice. He took a moment to dial it back a bit before continuing. "Scott, I'm sorry. I understand the deployment will be rough, but I want your experience on tap. We don't know what these people might run into out there. Your background and your skill set might be a very welcome addition, should things go even further into the shitter."

Mulligan snorted derisively, and Benchley found he couldn't contain his irritation any longer. He fixed Mulligan with an icy stare.

"As you still wear the uniform of the United States Army, you should be able to recognize an order when you hear one, Sergeant Major. Am I clear on that?"

"Hooah," Mulligan said. "With your permission, sir, I guess I ought to get to it."

"An excellent idea."

THE VEHICLE PREP area was a beehive of activity as a veritable army of maintainers, engineers, and SCEV crews crawled all over the two rigs. Andrews was in the thick of it himself, overseeing the reseating of SCEV Four's Mission Equipment Pod on the rig's broad back. Over the past nine hours, all the systems in the pod had been tested and certified as good to go; those that had failed were serviced until they were in the green. Even the MEP's complement of six Hellfire missiles had been replaced, and the millimeter wave seeker heads on each had been retuned to ensure perfect accuracy. That was a first; Andrews couldn't recall a time when he had seen every missile replaced before a mission. Sure, he'd seen one or two swapped out after failing a test, but the entire complement? Never.

"Why is patience a virtue?" Spencer shouted over the din of activity as he slid out from beneath the rig with another technician. Their coveralls were stained with oil and grime. "Why can't 'hurry the fuck up' be a virtue?"

"You can't push this stuff," the other maintainer said. "It's got to go slow—you know that."

"Slow is a comparative term."

"Hey, Spence!" Andrews barked as the MEP was locked down on SCEV Four's back. "What's the problem?"

Spencer looked tired but alert. He only had eyes for the rig, and he turned and scoured his high-tech baby for any defects related to the positioning of the MEP.

*A dedicated man*, Andrews thought.

"No problem, Captain. We swapped out the number one engine and the particle separator, along with the forward differential, which we'd already talked about. I was just busting McCready's balls. He moves like an old lady when it comes time to turning a wrench."

McCready frowned. "Dude, that's so not true."

Andrews saw that McCready was just about run out from working. God knew how many hours straight, and Spencer's riding him wasn't helping. He slapped Spencer's arm with the back of his hand. "Hey, why don't you knock off for some chow. I don't want you guys getting so damned tired that you're seeing double and making phantom adjustments."

"Yeah, yeah, just let me check the pod. Once that gets squared away, we've got the green light as far as I'm concerned. Everything else after that just involves bold type safety checks." As he spoke, he walked away from Andrews. He pulled an LED flashlight from inside his grimy uniform and shined it up at where the MEP joined the SCEV. He ran the beam all along the join, and Andrews knew he was looking for irregular gapping, something a junior technician could do.

"Spence, let someone else do that," Andrews said. "We've got five other SCEV crew chiefs here. They can take care of the MEP."

"My rig, my duty."

"Spencer, this isn't a gentle suggestion," Andrews said. "Knock off for a meal. If you drive yourself into the ground now, you'll be no good to me out in the field."

"Just a second, sir." Spencer hadn't paused in his inspection of the SCEV for one second, and he gave no indication he was going to stop for something as pedestrian as a meal. McCready looked from Spencer to Andrews and back again.

Andrews took four quick steps and seized hold of Spencer's arm, forcing him to stop and look at him. Spencer's brow furrowed in annoyance.

"Hey, Captain, if you want this tub ready to leave on schedule then—"

"Let. Someone. Else. Do. This. You've been going at this for hours straight. I want you to take a break. Don't fucking argue with me, Spencer, *just do it.*"

Spencer blinked. Andrews had never spoken to him like that before. He'd never had to. It shocked him as much as it did Spencer, but that was what it took to get through. Spencer nodded slowly.

"Okay. Okay, if you feel that strongly about it. No problem," the burly crew chief finally said.

"Glad you see it my way. Don't come back for at least twenty minutes."

"Sheesh. Okay, Dad." With that, Spencer walked off.

"What about me, sir?" McCready asked.

Andrews looked at him. "What do you do, again? Propulsion systems, right?"

"Roger that," McCready said. "Transmissions, differentials, all that stuff."

Andrews shrugged. "You don't work for me, so if you're done, you're done. Check with your boss."

McCready put his hands in his pockets and walked away. Andrews turned and looked up at the MEP that straddled his vehicle. He certainly had the chops to check for defective seals himself, so he grabbed a step ladder and went to work.

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The hours passed slowly and, before he knew it, Andrews had spent twenty of them in the prep area, going over SCEV Four and, when time permitted, SCEV Five. Laird's rig was in tip-top shape; it had undergone the full evaluations before SCEV Four had returned and was within days of jumping out. Little needed to be done except stock it with consumables, then it would be ready for the field.

"You look like hell," Laird said at one point. "You should knock off for a while, man."

"Can't," Andrews said. He felt exactly how Laird said he looked. His eyes were scratchy, and they burned as if they were orbs of flame. He felt at once jittery and bone-weary, and he was having trouble focusing. It wasn't that he wasn't capable of working long hours—in the field, everyone did. But the tasks he had to conduct required concentration and severe attention to detail, and performing such tasks back-to-back for hours only accelerated his exhaustion. He'd already cut his crew loose and instructed them to get some rest. Even Spencer had sacked out for a bit, albeit in one of the narrow bunks in the back of SCEV Four.

“Bullshit,” Laird said. “I watched you dismiss your entire crew, man. You need to get some shut-eye yourself, otherwise you’re going to be one messed-up cat when it comes time to jump out.”

Andrews rubbed his eyes. He knew Laird was right. Besides, he had about a gigabyte of regulations corroborating exactly that in his tablet. But he just couldn’t bring himself to knock off. SCEV Four was just in from the field, where it had been ridden hard, and now it was being sent back out before it had even entered the proper maintenance phase inspection. Andrews wasn’t sure he could sleep even if he *did* step out of the prep area.

He started to respond when movement in the cockpit of SCEV Four caught his attention. He rubbed his eyes again, then looked up at the thick viewports. Someone was sitting in the rig’s pilot seat.

“That would be Mulligan,” Laird said, following Andrews’s gaze. “Your newest, bestest pal.”

Andrews grunted. He hadn’t wanted Mulligan on the mission any more than he wanted Rachel. He was saddled with both of them, despite the fact that they would be at each other’s throats the entire time. To help alleviate this, Andrews and Laird had agreed that Rachel would crew on SCEV Five, while Mulligan crewed on Four. They would also work off-shift from each other; Mulligan would get the first shift, while Rachel would get the third. That would help prevent them from even hearing each other over the radios. Andrews thought it was all very childish, but he knew why Rachel felt the way she did, and there was no reasoning with her. Her wounds were years old, but the scar tissue was still extremely sensitive. Andrews didn’t need her picking at it any more than she already did.

“What’s he doing up there?” Andrews asked.

“Going over startup and shutdown procedures. It’s been a while for him, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Suddenly remembering something, Andrews turned to Laird. “Hey, Engineering was supposed to bring up two motorized dollies, one for each rig. We need them to—”

“Move the core supports, I know. And yes, both arrived, and one is in the aft storage compartment of each rig.” Laird nudged him in the ribs. “Dude, go take a nap, would you? I’ve got the duty on making sure your rig is prepped and ready to go for the next few hours, all right?”

Andrews looked around the prep area. Despite the hour, it was still humming, and SCEV Four was receiving most of the attention. Panels had been pulled open, and the equipment that lay behind them was undergoing thorough examination. Maintenance crews walked all over the top of the rig, checking antennae, infrared systems, lights, and high-frequency comms—anything they could get at.

He focused his attention on the figure sitting in the cockpit of his rig, and put his hands on his hips. He sighed, and Laird sighed as well.

“Man, you’ll have days to sit and chat with Mulligan. Get some rest, Mike.”

“I will.” He walked toward the SCEV’s open airlock door, the lower half of which formed a short stairway up into the airlock itself. As he mounted the stairs, he half-

turned his head, just long enough to see Laird shrug and turn his attention to more pressing matters.

Andrews hauled himself inside the Self-Contained Exploration Vehicle. The quarters were tight; the airlock was supposedly big enough for two people fully suited in Advanced Mission Oriented Protective Posture IV gear, which was true—presuming one of them was a circus midget. The inner airlock door was open, so he was able to step right into the rig's second compartment, which housed the engineering and science workstations, as well as the crew's microscopic "living area"—the portion of the SCEV where they would eat and do whatever it was they fancied when not piloting the rig, conducting experiments, or sleeping. A small dinette was set against the left bulkhead, opposite the kitchenette, which consisted of an over-and-under refrigerator and freezer, a convection/microwave oven, a sink, and storage cabinets. When not in its stowed position against the overhead, a twenty-inch LED display could be lowered to face the dinette as well. The SCEV had thousands of hours of movies, games, and other programming available, though it was all over ten years old.

The compartment floor was opened up, and several technicians were going over the rig's transmissions from the interior access points. Andrews saw the drive shafts that connected the rig's multiple differentials. The panels were opened all through the vehicle, even in the sleeping compartment in the back, where Andrews clearly heard Spencer sawing wood despite all the activity occurring right next to him. The technicians held data tablets, which were directly linked by DIN connections to the SCEV's maintenance access harness, and they compared settings.

"Hey, guys," he said. "Mind if I step in?"

"You're good to go, sir," one of the technicians said, barely glancing up.

"Why aren't you guys using the wireless?"

"It's saturated, sir. We've got a couple of dozen techs working this rig over, so all the access points are taken." The technician touched the cable connecting his tablet to the rig's data bus. "It's this, or nothing."

"Roger that. I'll leave you guys to it, then."

The technicians didn't acknowledge him further, so Andrews stepped over the gap in the floor beyond the airlock and turned to his right. Squeezing past the engineering and science stations, he made his way to the cockpit. The door was very narrow, so he had to bend slightly and rotate his shoulders. He knew Mulligan was sitting in the left seat—the command seat—so he turned toward the copilot's seat on the right side of the cockpit.

"Sarmajor," he said, slipping into the cockpit and lowering himself into the confines of the copilot's seat.

"Evening, Captain," Mulligan said. His voice was its usual basso rumble, and he turned his clear, green eyes toward Andrews, watching as he slipped into the seat. "You've been at it for quite a while, sir. Shouldn't you be getting some rack time?"

Andrews waved away the suggestion. "I'm good, Sarmajor. What are you up to?"

Mulligan pointed at the forward instrument panel, where the wide touchscreens glowed. On the center display, the computerized checklist was up and available, and several items had already been marked green.

"I'm going through the safety checklist. Even though we were instructed to skip the nonessential checks, I'm going through as many as possible. When I leave the cockpit, I intend to leave it sterile—with your permission, no one gets in or out until we're ready to jump out. That way, we'll preserve the vehicle status."

Andrews grunted. "Uh, you *are* aware that the rig's still being torn apart and put back together, right, Mulligan?"

Mulligan looked at him expressionlessly. "Yes, Captain, I'd caught onto that. This is how we did things back in the day, when there was the chance we wouldn't have time to run through checklists and the like, but recognized there was a high-threat level that could mandate equipment use right off the cuff."

"I understand, Sarmajor. But these vehicles are going to be accessed right up until we leave ..."

Mulligan shook his head. "Untrue. We'll go into a rest cycle before we jump out. I've already been over that with General Benchley. He agrees that we'll need a bit of downtime before we leave, after everyone's been burning the candle at both ends trying to get these vehicles ready for departure."

Andrews blinked, surprised. *Just how much pull does Mulligan have, anyway?*

"I don't see how that's possible, Mulligan. We need to get to California ASAP and —"

"The *successful* completion of the mission is what's important, Captain, and if Harmony can give us six hours to get some rest to increase the chances of mission success, then the command group is all for it. After all, we're the last card these people have to play." The big man paused for a moment. "I take it that Benchley or Walters haven't talked to you about this yet?"

"No. Not yet." He tried to keep his composure, but he was already getting irritated with Mulligan. What he said made sense, but he should have discussed it with Andrews first before going to the command group. As the mission commander, Andrews was the one who should be lobbying for such things, not a command sergeant major, even one as storied as Scott Mulligan.

Mulligan must have been able to read his mind. "You and the other officers were all wrapped around the axle trying to get the rigs up and mission capable, sir. I decided to go to the command group on my own initiative, figuring that it was something you wouldn't have time for. Sorry if I stomped on any toes."

Andrews was mollified a bit by his apology. "No ... no, that's cool, Sarmajor. Thanks for doing that. I hadn't even thought about it." As soon as he said the last bit, he felt a surge of embarrassment.

Mulligan didn't appear to notice. "No problem on this end, Captain."

"Yeah, well ... thanks again." Andrews hesitated for a moment. "Listen, Mulligan. I wanted to talk to you about Rachel."

"All right."

"You know what her problem is with you, right?"

"Sure," Mulligan said without looking away. "I killed her parents."

The big enlisted man's response was so casual, he might have been discussing the merits of his favorite color. That flustered Andrews even more; he was so taken aback, all he could say was, "You *did*?"



"They were in SCEV One with me, Captain. Is that what you want to talk about?"

Andrews considered that for a moment. "Do you want to tell me about that?"

"No, sir. I do not."

Andrews nodded. "I just wanted to tell you that I know there's going to be friction, so Laird and I are working to keep the two of you apart. Separate vehicles, separate shifts, all that stuff. If we can manage it right, you guys won't even have to talk over the radio."

"That's great, sir. This deployment is going to be a real ball-buster, so I appreciate you taking these measures on the behalf of your wife and myself."

Again, Mulligan's demeanor was so damned nonchalant and his responses were so glib that Andrews found he was getting pretty pissed off. And Mulligan's presence was going to make a lot of people uncomfortable, most notably Rachel. Scott Mulligan was feared by most, and revered by a few; for his part, Andrews was starting to finally get a handle on him. The guy was just an asshole.

"You know, Sarmajor, it might be better if you were to unass and stay in Harmony," he said. "I'm pretty sure the mission would go a lot more smoothly without the rest of us having to keep an eye on the drama meter and all."

"I agree with that, Captain. Maybe you can speak to Benchley about that, since he's the one who ordered me to be added to the roster? Come back with orders from him to unass, and I'm gone—otherwise, I'm going along for the ride." There was a certain coldness to Mulligan's voice that Andrews found intimidating.

"I'll see what I can do, Mulligan. But from where I'm sitting? You probably aren't the best asset for this mission."

Mulligan shrugged. "Like I said, I agree. But it's not my call, Captain."

Andrews shrugged and changed gears. "I like what you said about sterilizing the SCEVs. We've never done that before. How can we enforce it?"

"Easy. I post guys with guns with orders to shoot anyone who doesn't have authorization to touch the vehicles," Mulligan said. "Pretty old world, but also pretty effective."

"You're kidding me," Andrews said, shock evident in his voice.

Mulligan frowned. "If someone presses your buttons hard enough, you'll find killing them is pretty easy." He seemed to take stock of Andrews's distress, then sighed and looked at the displays before him. "Listen, no one's going to get shot, and I know no one's going to maliciously fiddle with the rigs. But we'll want to prohibit physical as well as electronic access to them while the crews are in their rest period. Posting armed guards is an effective deterrent."

"If you say so, Sarmajor."

Mulligan looked back at Andrews once again. "I say so, sir. Now, if I were you, I'd hightail it out of here and look to get an audience with Benchley, if he's available. If not, then I'd take the opportunity to get some rest."

"Roger that, Sarmajor."

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Benchley felt like death warmed over as he went through the latest damage control reports at his desk in the command center. Even though the chamber was dimly lit—all nonessential systems had been ordered shut down to preserve energy, and that included a fair share of overhead lighting—the center was fully staffed, everyone busy coordinating the ongoing emergency responses. Benchley was shocked by just how badly damaged portions of the base were. While the big ticket items were obviously the loss of Harmony's primary and secondary power generation systems, the devastation to the SCEV bay elevator, for instance, was simply stunning. It could take *weeks* to restore that platform's capability, and Harmony had only one central vehicle lift. Benchley shook his head. *So much for contingency capabilities.*

He must've zoned out for a moment, because the next thing he knew, Mike Andrews was standing at attention before the desk. Benchley blinked, trying to clear the cobwebs from his head. He rubbed his chin and felt the rasp of razor stubble there. What the hell was Andrews doing here? Benchley tried to straighten up in his chair. He looked old and rumped, he knew. Hell, he *felt* old and rumped.

"What's up, Mike?" he asked finally, not terribly surprised by how rough his voice sounded.

"Wanted to talk to you about Sergeant Major Mulligan, sir." Andrews relaxed minutely and looked around the command center quickly. "I know you wanted Colonel Walters to be the relay between the team and the command group, but I'd just as soon drop this one on you myself. Can I bend your ear for a moment, sir?"

"And what about the most interesting man in Harmony Base did you want to talk about?" Benchley placed his elbows on the desktop and leaned forward, trying to at least appear interested. He already knew Andrews was going to try to get Mulligan off the mission. Andrews could be a very persuasive young man when it suited him, and Benchley knew his rationale would be sound. He found himself confronted with two possible responses. The first option was to explain his decision to the mission commander in a way that he could break down and digest, which would have been a tough thing for Benchley to do even if he wasn't running on fumes. The second was to just shut Andrews down right away. He was a company grade officer, and he was mostly still a receiver of orders, not an issuer. Benchley decided to opt for expedience.

"Sir, you know some of the personal history between Mulligan and—"

"Everyone needs to get over it, right now." Benchley kept his voice even but stern. "I'm aware of the conflicts between Mulligan and your wife, and I obviously consider that friction to be survivable. Both Mulligan and your wife have skills that might be needed—therefore, they go. Anything else?"

Andrews blinked. His overall expression did not change, but Benchley could tell his response had caught Andrews flat-footed, and the SCEV captain didn't know what to do. Benchley was pleased when the other man decided to press on. Mike Andrews had stones. No other SCEV commander would run right back to the line after being shoved back.

"He might have the appropriate ratings, sir, but he's not one of us. He's going to get in the way, and he's going to be stepping on everyone's air hose the entire way out and the entire way back. In my opinion, he poses a *substantial* risk to this mission's success."

Benchley leaned back into the confines of his chair. "Under normal circumstances, Andrews, I'd agree with you. You know I'd never assign Mulligan to anything other than a training mission to keep his ratings current. That man's wired pretty tightly, but he's a consummate professional in his field, and he just might very well be a force multiplier in this circumstance."

"Sir, I don't get it. He's a Green Beret. Those guys ran around blowing stuff up and making a lot of people fall over dead. How can he possibly add any value to what we do? Please, sir, help me out here."

"Army Special Forces was about a lot more than 'blowing stuff up and making a lot of people fall over dead,' Captain. There's a specific heritage of service embodied by that branch, and part of that heritage involves making substantial personal sacrifice. Mulligan hasn't forgotten any of that. Hell, he's probably been waiting for the past ten years to bang some of the rust off those old skills of his. The non-killing ones, I mean."

"Uh ... sounds great, sir, but—"

Benchley held up a hand. "But nothing, Captain. He's going. Sorry it's a personal inconvenience for you, but do us all a favor and figure that shit out, all right?" Benchley looked at Andrews significantly, and he knew his expression alone would have been enough to tell Andrews he'd run out of altitude on this one. "You get where I'm coming from on this, Andrews?"

Andrews brought himself to attention as smartly as he could. "Yes, sir. I get where you're coming from. Sarmajor Mulligan's on the roster, and that's how it's going to be. I'll get everything squared away, sir."

"Outstanding, Andrews. Simply outstanding. Anything else?"

"No, sir," Andrews said woodenly.

"Then get some rest, Captain. Colonel Walters tells me the rigs will be locked down within the hour, and that your mission jumps out at zero eight hundred tomorrow. That gives you five hours of rack time. I suggest you make the best of it."

"Roger that, General." Andrews saluted. Benchley sighed at the unnecessary formality—he was seated, after all—but he got to his feet and returned the salute. There was no need to piss Andrews off any more than he already had. He would have his hands full in the field, and Benchley needed him as focused as possible. He watched as Andrews slipped out of the center, defeated, then sank back into his chair.

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"Mulligan's going," Andrews told Rachel later as he held her in their darkened quarters. Aside from the commotion of ongoing repairs, the base seemed unusually quiet; the customary noises of working machinery that moved air and water and powered lights were mostly absent, and Andrews thought the void made the darkness a bit spooky.

"Benchley wouldn't talk with you about it?" she asked after a long moment.

"He talked to me. Well, more like I listened to him talk, but that's what it came down to. Mulligan's on the roster, and this is what it's going to be." Andrews kissed her neck tenderly, breathing in her smell. Even though she hadn't had a hot shower in the

past day or so, she still smelled great. "If it means anything, I talked to Mulligan as well. He doesn't want to go either, but he has to roger up and do what he's told."

Rachel said nothing.

"We just have to get through it, babe. We get those supports and get back here so the lights can be turned on again, and that's all there is to it. Mulligan isn't important, and he's not going to do anything to screw this up. This is his home, too."

"Let's get some sleep," she said finally. "We have a long day tomorrow." She turned away from him and faced the wall, presenting him with her back. Andrews sighed. He knew why she was pissed, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Good night," he said.

She didn't answer.

**“WE** SEEM TO be spending more time here than usual,” Jim Laird said when Andrews stepped into the vehicle ready bay. It was already full of people, most of them standing around and waiting. Spencer looked agitated, and it didn’t take a social scientist to figure out why. When Mulligan had said the rigs were frozen, he hadn’t been kidding; armed guards had kept the SCEV maintainers and crews away from the waiting rigs.

“Okay, what’s the SITREP here?” Andrews asked.

Laird pointed at the waiting SCEVs. “Rigs are frozen, and no one goes near them until you give the word. You’re the mission commander, so both assets are under your operational control.” He sniffed and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “They wouldn’t accept my authority to grant the crews access, so we were waiting for you. I was about to have you paged over the intercom, actually.”

Andrews checked his watch. “Hey, I’m a half hour early.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure you get a commendation for that.”

Andrews ignored Laird’s slightly pissy tone. “Oscar, are you in charge of the guard detail?” he asked one of the sentries. He was a tall, broad-shouldered staff sergeant of Hispanic extraction, and his dark skin was covered with a slight sheen of sweat.

“Yes, sir,” Oscar said.

“We’d like to access the rigs now, and start the pre-launch checks. Any problem with that?”

“Negative, Captain. You’re good to go, sir.”

Andrews waved to the waiting maintainers. “Let’s get it done,” he said.

“About fucking time,” Spencer grouched.

“Orders, man. I got orders,” Oscar told him. “Major Alexander gave ’em to me, but you know where they really came from? Mulligan, man.”

“Ah, screw him,” Spencer said testily.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Oscar said. “He’ll rip your little wiener out by the roots and slap you across the face with it.”

“Spencer, knock off the shit and do your job,” Andrews told him. He asked Laird, “All essential personnel present?”

“Waiting on Mulligan. And your wife, actually.”

“She’ll be here in fifteen. We don’t need her or Mulligan for the vehicle checks, so let’s get started.”

“Hooah.”

The maintenance crews went to work making the final checks. Andrews made a quick walkaround of SCEV Four, checking the various sight gauges and ensuring the fluid levels were right on the line, the tires were in proper condition for an overland hike, the infrared turrets were clean, and the heavy duty shock absorption system was

in good repair. He had no problem shouldering maintainers aside so he could crawl into the inspection spaces and put his own eyes on target. Getting his hands dirty was never something he'd been afraid of, and within minutes they were covered with grime and grease. He removed several axle bellows and checked them for any residual grit from the rig's last trip, and he was happy to see they were as clean as if the rig had just rolled off the assembly line. Crawling out from beneath the vehicle, he glanced over at SCEV Five and saw Laird doing the same thing, and just as aggressively. Good. While he'd known Jim for as long as he'd known anyone, he'd never crewed with him before, and he was glad to see the broad-shouldered officer was as dedicated to mission prep as he was.

Andrews took some time to clean as much of the grime from his hands as he could before climbing the short stairway to the rig's interior. There was no need to make it any dirtier than necessary just yet; there'd be plenty of time for it to get messed up during the mission, and he preferred to keep the living and working spaces as pristine as possible.

Inside, Tony Choi and Leona Eklund were already conducting functionality checks of the environmental systems, and another technician still had the floor pulled up in the sleeping area, going over the last third of the transmission system. Andrews nodded to his crew, then looked past them at the technician servicing the tranny.

"Hey, Halderman. Make sure the holding tank has been emptied, all right?"

Halderman smiled. "You're good to go on that, sir. Everyone is free to pee with abandon."

"That's what I wanted to hear, thanks."

Andrews pushed himself into the cockpit and slid into the left seat. The rig was still running on external power, so activating the instrument panel was as simple as flipping a switch on the inverter panel. Chimes sounded as the instruments powered up, and the screens came to life as the rig's array of computers booted. Once the power-on test was completed, a schematic of the vehicle appeared on the center display. He could see every panel that was open on the rig's exterior, the status of every system, the level of every fluid reservoir—and he was happy to confirm that Halderman had been correct, the rig's poop tank was reading as empty. The SCEVs were powered by a sophisticated hybrid powerplant, using two variable-speed turboshaft engines for propulsion that in turn charged an array of batteries that would keep the rig going for a couple of days in the unlikely event both engines shit the bed. Andrews ran all the pre-ignition checks but stopped short of actually starting the rig—even though there were at least two pre-positioned caches of fuel along their route, he had no idea if they were still accessible, or if they'd been raided in the war's aftermath. In light of that, they'd need to preserve every drop of fuel in the tanks.

Spencer stuck his head inside the cockpit. "Hey, *el Capitan*. We're good to go on the externals. I'm going to have them pull external power once you give the word. And the big guy is coming up now." The crew chief pointed out the thick viewport windows.

Andrews looked through them and saw Mulligan sauntering toward the rig, a scowl on his face. The maintainers gave the big NCO a wide berth, wary of his foul expression.

"Take another walkaround, just to be safe," he told Spencer. "I'll let you know when you can disconnect the external power supply."

"Roger that." Spencer ducked out of the cockpit, and Andrews paged through the menus on the system display, checking off items that had been completed. A moment later, he felt a presence hovering over his right shoulder. Andrews looked up, even though he knew who it was. Mulligan looked down at him with eyes that were about as warm as a polar ice cap.

"Sergeant Major," Andrews said by way of greeting.

"I see you weren't successful in getting me pulled off the roster," Mulligan said.

"No, I wasn't."

"Regrettable."

Andrews pointed to the right seat. "I take it you remember the ignition procedures?"

"I'm not that out of it, sir." Mulligan crouched down as he pushed himself into the cockpit and lowered himself into the copilot's seat with surprising dexterity. Andrews was impressed. The cockpit was extremely tight, and the close quarters made taking a seat almost an exercise in gymnastic torture. That a man of Mulligan's size was able to slip into the copilot's seat almost effortlessly made it seem as though he'd spent a lifetime crewing on SCEVs.

"Something wrong, Captain?"

Andrews smiled and shook his head. "We're good, Sarmajor. Maybe you can show Choi how to enter the cockpit like you did—it's a pain in the ass when he kicks the center console and flips the radio frequencies."

"I'll make a note of it."

Andrews slipped on his radio headset and, from the corner of his eye, saw Mulligan do the same. "Leona, are we buttoned up back there?"

"Roger, we're secure throughout the rig," Leona reported from the second compartment. "All floor panels are replaced and locked, and only crew are aboard at this time."

"Roger that. Mulligan, bring the APU online, if you would."

Without consulting the procedure, Mulligan reached to the overhead console and flipped two switches. From inside the SCEV's belly, a groaning whine sounded. The rig's auxiliary power unit came to life and, as soon as it began delivering the proper amount of current, the rig's onboard computer shut off the external power supply. SCEV Four was now running on full internal power.

Andrews reached for the control column beside him and pressed the red radio button. "Five, this is Four. Are you guys ready to crank? Over."

Jim Laird's voice came back a moment later. "Roger that, Four. Ready whenever you are. Over."

"Roger. Light 'em up." Andrews motioned for Spencer, who was standing outside just off the SCEV's nose, to pull the external power cable. Spencer reached forward, unlocked the cord's head, then removed it and held it up for Andrews to see. Beside Spencer, SCEV Five's crew chief did the same thing and showed the disconnected cable to Laird. Andrews shot Spencer a thumbs-up.

"Crew, prepare for engine start," he said.

"Ready for start back here," Leona reported.

Andrews flipped the switch to start the rig's first turbine engine. Since the powerplants were equipped with a fully automatic digital engine control—FADEC—there was no need to worry about the potential of a hot start, when fuel would begin to burn prematurely, causing a fire. The FADEC system managed the entire startup sequence, keeping the starter motor blowing cool air throughout the engine's turbine section until the appropriate pressure level was reached and the fuel/air mixture in the engine's compression area could be safely ignited. Once that happened, the engine spooled up rapidly. The turbine's whine was clearly audible, even through his headset's ear cups.

"Clean start," Mulligan reported. "T5 is good, exhaust temperature's normal." Mulligan made the same report after the second engine had been activated and spooled up.

"Thanks. You good to go on the post-start checklist?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Sarmajor." Andrews glanced over at Laird's rig. "SCEV Five, this is Four. Ignition positive. Over."

"Four, this is Five. We're operational on this side. Over."

"Roger that. Break. Bay Control, this is SCEV Four. We're about ready for departure. Over." As he spoke, Andrews saw the maintenance crews packing it up, pulling their rolling tool chests away from the two vehicles. Fuel and power lines had already been disconnected and were being reeled up onto their spools. The two SCEVs were technically free to maneuver. From the corner of his left eye, he saw SCEV Five's outer airlock door cycle closed. A slight but noticeable change in air pressure tickled his eardrums as his own rig was buttoned up. Once the airlock doors were closed, the SCEV became "inflatable," meaning it was slightly pressurized to keep its interior clear of any biological or radioactive contaminants it might encounter while roving about on the surface.

"SCEV Four, Bay Control. You're clear for lift one at your discretion, though we would appreciate it if you could expedite your departure. Over."

*Expedite our departure?* "Well, I guess they can't wait for us to get gone," Andrews muttered.

"They're having to burn more energy for the ventilation system," Mulligan said. "The rigs running are dumping a lot of poisonous exhaust into the bay, and running the fans and scrubbers for more than a few minutes is a bit of a luxury they really can't afford."

"Ah, right. Thanks for that, Sergeant Major."

"It's what I'm here for, sir. Post-start checklist complete. Want to grade my work?"

Andrews glared at the bigger man, but if he was at all affected by Andrews's irritated expression, Mulligan didn't show it. If anything, Andrews thought he detected a ghost of a smile threatening to form on the big NCO's weathered, Hollywood-handsome face. He remembered years ago overhearing his mother mention how Mulligan looked like a super-sized Charlton Heston, and he'd made it a point to watch one of the actor's old movies. Sure enough, the resemblance was uncanny.



"No, we're good," Andrews said, turning away. "Bay Control, SCEV Four. Roger, we're rolling now. Over."

"Roger, SCEV Four."

Andrews pushed the control column forward a quarter inch, and the rig slowly trundled forward, its big, knobbed tires rolling across the steel plank floor. A soldier with illuminated wands guided Andrews around the idling bulk of SCEV Five and pointed him straight toward the huge cargo elevator that would take the vehicle to the surface. As the rig rolled forward, following the yellow lines on the floor, the soldier saluted—the usual sendoff whenever a vehicle departed Harmony Base. Mulligan returned the salute as Andrews steered twenty-eight tons of composites, aluminum, titanium, steel, assorted plastics, rubber, and human bodies toward the waiting elevator.

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The elevator brought the rig up to the dry surface in less than two minutes, but it was among the longest couple of minutes Andrews could remember having lived through. He found he was suddenly gripped by a fear that the lift might fail due to undetected quake damage. Getting hung up would be bad, but if the lift suddenly sheared off the rails and plummeted back into the base, the result would be lethal. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief when the elevator made it to the surface and stopped as fluidly as it always had.

He then remembered the elevator needed to make another trip, and that it would be bearing his wife. *Here's hoping Five makes it up, too.*

When the thick doors slid open, harsh sunlight slashed at Andrews's eyes, partially blinding him despite the sunglasses he wore. The viewports polarized automatically, darkening against the brilliant light. Andrews blinked away the glare and pushed the control column forward. The SCEV lumbered out of the elevator and onto the parched, dusty ground.

*"Warning: External radiation level—four point two sieverts."*

Andrews silenced the alarm with his right hand as he brought the SCEV into a sweeping left turn. The rig bumped slightly over the terrain, and Mulligan kept his eyes on the displays.

"So four point two sieverts, that's bad, right?" he said.

"You gotta be kidding me, Mulligan," Andrews answered. He tightened the SCEV's turn, pulling the rig around until it was pointed back at the elevator. He braked the rig to a halt, just as the elevator's doors slid closed. Then the entire cubicle disappeared, descending back into the ground as another set of doors slid closed, sealing up the shaft. To the rig's right, a tall electronic surveillance mast rose over a hundred feet into the air. It was dotted with all manner of antennae, which could monitor signals across the entire electromagnetic spectrum. Other than the blast doors that covered the elevator shaft, the ESM mast was the only physical indication Harmony Base even existed. As Andrews watched, a dry wind gave birth to several dust devils that swirled around the idling SCEV.

"I am kidding you, sir. I'm aware that four sieverts equals lethal radiation exposure, resulting in acute radiation syndrome and death in unprotected individuals." Mulligan smiled humorlessly. "Tell you what, I'll skip the levity for the rest of the trip."

"That would be great." Into his headset, he added, "Bay Control, this is SCEV Four. We're on top and holding for SCEV Five. Over."

"Roger, SCEV Four. Five will be on its way in just a minute. Over."

"Understood, Control." As they waited, Andrews scanned the instrument panel. The SCEV's systems seemed to be operating perfectly. Nevertheless, he loosened his shoulder straps a bit and leaned around the bulkhead that separated the cockpit from the rig's second compartment. He saw Leona and Spencer sitting at their duty stations, directly behind the bulkhead and across from the inner airlock door.

"Spence, how are we looking?"

"We're in great shape. All systems are doing fine." The swarthy crew chief added a double thumbs-up for emphasis. "How are things up front? The Sarmajor hypnotized by all the pretty blinky lights?"

"Keep that up, Sergeant, and I'll introduce you to some *really* pretty blinky lights," Mulligan said, holding up a big fist.

Spencer barked his characteristic laugh and turned back to his station. Leona looked at Andrews and gave him a pale smile. Andrews smiled back and faced forward, tightening his straps.

"Here comes Five." Mulligan pointed out the viewport. Through the thick, shaded glass, Andrews saw SCEV Five haul itself out of the elevator, which had just risen from the ground.

"Let's get this show on the road. Guys, we're getting ready to roll," he said, then eased the control column forward. "SCEV Five, this is SCEV Four. Over."

"Go for Five. Over," Laird responded via radio.

"This is SCEV Four. Come around to heading two-seven-seven and let's make best speed for the west. Over."

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In the darkened command center, General Martin Benchley sat at his command console in the rear of Harmony Base's nerve center. On one of the displays embedded in his station, he watched as the two Self-Contained Exploration Vehicles accelerated away, heading for the distant western horizon.

*And with them go our hopes and dreams.*

He sensed a presence behind him and turned. Corrine Baxter looked past him at the monitor, her brow furrowed, the worry plain on her face.

"Think Andrews'll be able to pull this off, sir?"

Benchley thought about it for a moment. *Really* thought about it. When he did that, he found he didn't care much for the answer, so he fell back to the usual platitude an officer in his position would be expected to make.

"He has to, Colonel. There are no other alternatives."

**T**HE TWO SELF-CONTAINED Exploration Vehicles rolled across the shattered landscape, making their way westward as fast as they could. Several roads and interstates were still marginally navigable; even though the war that had decimated much of the United States had been violent and almost completely lethal, it was the aftermath that had caused the most damage. The deadly fallout that had descended across the Midwestern portion of the country had worked its dire magic over the course of days and weeks, giving sickened populations the ability to try to travel. As such, the roadways near major cities and towns were choked with automobiles of all types, from thrifty economy hybrids to tractor-trailer rigs hauling sixty-foot trailers. While many of these tie-ups had already been mapped, once the SCEVs moved past the areas that had previously been reconnoitered, they found themselves confronted time and time again with impassable traffic jams, columns of motor vehicles that were now nothing more than rotting sheet metal and delaminating fiberglass. Occasionally visible behind the dusty, grime-covered windows of several vehicles, the mummified remains of humanity could be seen.

The two rigs had to backtrack from those impassable snarls and strike out overland. But the SCEVs had been designed for just such a voyage. Patterned after the venerable HEMT-T A3 tactical truck used by the military, the SCEVs were able to roll across fields and over hills without much incident. So long as soft ground was avoided and treacherous ravines were skirted, the two rigs pushed on, fording dried-up creeks and virtually empty riverbeds when necessary. Overhead, skies the color of cobalt gleamed, free of any sort of storm activity. It was an austere beautiful sight, but still, the day was lethal with radiation from the war and that which descended from the heavens, thanks to the decimated ozone layer.

The vehicles drove on, bouncing and jouncing across the terrain, unperturbed by the deadly conditions. Their turbine engines wailed, and their big, knobby tires bit into the dry soil, leaving long plumes of dust that rose into the air behind them.

As the sun slowly set, the day died another death as night reigned supreme. The SCEVs did not stop; their floodlights cut a swath through the gathering darkness, illuminating the terrain ahead with brilliant light that would have blinded anyone who looked directly at them.

If anyone had been alive to witness the event, of course.

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Mulligan sat in the command seat on the left side of the cockpit, the control column in his left hand. He kept his eyes on the instruments, maintaining a watchful position and scanning the radar display that mapped the terrain beyond the pool of light cast by the rig's floodlights. Leona watched him from the corner of her eye for the first hour of

their shift together, then finally just looked at him directly every now and then. If he noticed, Mulligan said nothing. He merely continued to do his job, which was to oversee the rig's progress across the darkened landscape. Leona had to admire his single-minded determination. It had been years since he'd been out in the field, but he handled the rig like a pro, always skirting barely noticeable breaks in the terrain that might have slowed their progress to a crawl. And he did so without the ham-handed acceleration and braking that someone like Tony Choi would have subjected them to. Mulligan knew how to keep the SCEV on course, and obviously knew the value in making the trek as comfortable as possible.

Finally, the big sergeant major stirred. He reached inside one of the pockets on his Army combat uniform blouse and pulled out a long, cylindrical tube. Holding one end in his mouth, he unscrewed the cap on the other end, then reversed it and tipped it back. At first, Leona thought it was some sort of beverage in a decidedly unusual-looking container. Instead, it was something she hadn't seen in years—a cigar.

"You're not going to actually *smoke* that thing, are you?" she asked, a little shocked. "It's against regulations, you know ..."

"Lieutenant, sometimes the only good regulation is a broken regulation."

Leona was properly scandalized. "You're kidding," was all she could say. "Do you realize what that will do to the CO2 scrubbers? Not to mention the smell—"

"Relax, Lieutenant. I know all about the delicate balance of the rig's environmental systems. Don't worry, I'm not going to light up. I only do that on special occasions." Mulligan chewed on the end of the cigar. "If one ever happens to pop up, that is."

"God—you actually *do* smoke those things? How can you stand to do that to your body?"

Mulligan scanned the instruments, then looked out the viewports. "After everything we've been through, ma'am, one might think a little secondhand smoke wouldn't be high on your list of worries."

"Everything's high on my worry list, Sergeant Major."

"Yeah, I remember you always being the high-maintenance sort. Even as a kid in basic, you always wanted to know why things were done one way and not the other. But like I said, you're safe. I'm not going to light the thing." Mulligan seemed to think that ended the conversation. He continued to drive and make his instrument scans with a metronomic regularity that Leona actually admired. While Command Sergeant Major Scott Mulligan was a riddle wrapped up in an enigma, she was surprised to see just how disciplined he was.

"Well ... where did you get it?" she asked after a long pause.

"I grew it."

"You did? Where?"

"I have a small portion of the hydroponics farm allocated to me. I grow a tobacco plant there, and harvest it when the time is right. Then I make my own cigars." Mulligan switched the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. "Not as good as a Cohiba Edicion, but they get the job done."

Leona nodded and scanned the instruments herself. She had nearly another three hours before she took the left seat and Choi came forward to take the copilot's seat. "I see."

Mulligan said nothing.

"So ... what did you do before the war, Mulligan?"

"I defended truth, justice, and the American way."

She smiled at that. "Why do you always act like such a hard-ass?"

"It's no act, Lieutenant."

Feeling suddenly bold, Leona pressed on, even though the big man's body language seemed to indicate he wasn't particularly interested in chatting. Just the same, this was the first time she'd ever been in close proximity to the mysterious senior NCO of Harmony Base. If he thought he was going to go for a couple of weeks without interacting with the rest of the crew, he was severely mistaken.

"So other than being a soldier, what else did you do? Were you ever married?"

Mulligan's only reaction was to reposition the cigar in his mouth. In the glow of the flat panel displays on the instrument panel, Leona thought she saw a glimmer of a scowl flit across his face.

"What's the matter, Sergeant Major—couldn't get a date?"

Mulligan finally turned to her. His face was as devoid of emotion as the surface of the moon was absent of air, but his tone was anything but sedate. "Lieutenant, keep this up and the only thing you'll get out of me is a severe whipping from an enlisted man. We're not here to get to know each other on a personal level—we're on a mission. As such, I would respectfully recommend you concentrate on the current mission essentials, which at the moment are backing me up on the instruments and assisting in terrain avoidance, while ensuring the rig's systems are checked according to schedule. Is that clear, ma'am?"

Leona clenched her teeth, a little pissed off at his tone. He was perilously close to insubordination.

*So what're you going to do, try and pull rank on Mulligan? Yeah, do that. It'll be all sorts of fun.*

"I read you, Sarmajor," she said.

"Hooah," Mulligan said simply, then turned away from her and peered out the viewports. Leona watched him for a moment, then sighed and leaned back in her seat.

It was going to be one very long mission.

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"So how's it going?"

Rachel's voice sounded distant and remote over the headset transceiver Andrews wore as he lay stretched out on one of the bunks in the rear of SCEV Four. He had strapped himself into the narrow, slightly bowed bed in a bid to keep from being pitched to the deck should the rig roll over some broken terrain, and he'd asked Rachel to do the same. While it was a small thing, she had no experience with SCEV operations, and ignoring even mundane details like that could get her killed.

"Everything's good on this side," he told her, speaking softly even though he was alone in the compartment. "You getting by over there?"

"Sure. Jim's patient with me, and Kelly's giving me some pointers. Tony's doing the same, but I think he'd rather be over on your rig than stuck over here." Rachel paused. "Come to think of it, so would I."

"Non-starter, babe. Separation of church and state and all that."

"Oh, I'm your church now? Or am I your state?" she asked, a playful lilt in her voice.

"Well, I do worship you."

"Such a sweet talker you are."

"Isn't that why you married me?"

"Yes. Well, that and the fact that you're great in the sack."

Andrews laughed. "Now, now ... keep it clean. The channel's encrypted, but you can never be sure."

Rachel laughed as well. "I know, I know. Besides, I have to start my shift in a few minutes. I'm taking right seat."

"Who has left? Jordello?"

"Yeah. She's going to show me the ropes for the next few hours."

"Well, try not to roll the rig, all right? That's Choi's job."

Rachel laughed again, then grew serious. "How are things with the asshole?"

Andrews frowned, put out by her derogatory language. "Mulligan's been fine. Professional. He's getting the job done, and he's keeping to himself. He knows he's an anachronism out here, so he's not pushing any buttons." That last part was a bit of a lie, for he felt that Mulligan was smirking at them on the inside. The senior NCO certainly didn't try to hide his smug aloofness, and that bugged Andrews quite a bit.

"Don't trust him, Mike."

"I've got my eye on him, babe. Don't worry about it."

She snorted. "How can I *not* worry about it? You're over there, with him—"

"Easy, now," Andrews said, not wanting the conversation to devolve into another one-sided shit-flinging contest. "I know the guy's history, and we've been over this already. He's not going to screw things up. Take it easy, Rachel."

After a long pause, she said, "I'm trying."

Andrews was suddenly painfully aware of the distance that separated them, and he found he very much wanted to hold her in his arms—not just to help ease her distress, but because she was so close to him, yet so very far. As much as she worried about him crewing with Mulligan, he found it difficult not to obsess over her being in the field as well. He'd had the training and had volunteered to be inducted into the US Army after the war, so field time was part of what he was all about. For her, it was an entirely accidental occurrence, and he feared for her safety, despite the fact that Jim Laird was as competent at SCEV ops as he was. Kelly Jordello and Tony Choi were able hands, as well. There was no lack of practical experience surrounding Rachel, and Andrews really couldn't have asked for her to be protected by a better team.

"Hey, be glad you're not over here. Seriously," Andrews said, "you don't have to smell Spencer's farts. The guy has no class. He just blows 'em all over the rig. I don't know what the hell it is he's eating, but it's practically chemical warfare over here."

Rachel laughed, but it sounded false, forced. Andrews sighed. There wasn't any way to help her relax, and that made him feel even worse about things.

The rig slowed suddenly and bumped to a more-or-less gentle halt. It was time to change shifts, which meant Mulligan would be surrendering the left seat to Leona, while Spencer moved forward to occupy the copilot's seat. Outside, SCEV Five would be rolling to a stop as well, and Rachel would have her first opportunity to act as a rig copilot.

"Okay, I guess this is it," Andrews said. "You take care of yourself, babe."

"I will. What are you going to do now?"

"Get some sleep. What else is there to do? In six hours, I've got to stand up and prepare for my next shift."

"Right. Well, sleep well. Pleasant dreams. I love you, Michael."

"I love you too, hon. Take it easy, all right?"

"I will. Good night." And with that, the link went dead.

Andrews leaned back in his bunk and pulled the headset off, listening to the sounds of the crew change. A moment later, the pressure door at the head of the compartment opened, and Mulligan stepped inside the sleeping area. He flipped on one of the overhead lights, and Andrews screwed his eyes shut against the sudden brightness. Mulligan made a brief, apologetic noise, then walked to the rear of the compartment where the head was located. He pulled open the door, stepped inside, and closed it behind him. Andrews heard the lock click into place.

A moment later, the SCEV started moving again. Andrews hoped Mulligan didn't piss all over the place, and if he did, that he'd have the decency to clean up after himself.

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Hours later, Mulligan awoke in his bunk. The sleeping area had been designed to accommodate persons of average height and weight, and he found the bunks were just a bit too short to comfortably house his six-foot-six-inch frame. Therefore, he was forced to sleep curled up, something that he found unpleasant, given that he needed to be strapped in as well. That alone made for a less than restful sleep. Even though he had long since grown used to the jouncing and bouncing of the SCEV as it plowed across the landscape, he found that his head would invariably strike the side of the bunk's hard plastic shell, and that always jolted him awake. He moved the thin pillow a bit in a bid to gain some protection, but that could only last for so long. Mulligan consigned himself to being tired and even more grumpy than usual over the next several days.

And if the lack of sleep wouldn't to him, then the voyage across the burned-out remains of the United States most certainly would.

For years, he had been confined to the sterile environment of Harmony Base, with only a few brief sojourns to the surface to maintain currency in his SCEV ratings. He had grown used to the barren wastelands surrounding the base's training range, and he had never strayed from it, even when the desire to turn to the east and drive all out possessed him with such fury that he feared he might do just that.

But watching the irradiated world pass by as the SCEV drove mile after mile after mile, Mulligan felt a queer sense of derangement settling over him. For a decade, he had existed as virtually nothing more than a phantasm stalking the corridors and gangways of Harmony, a hollow man whose soul had been laid to waste. But he hadn't really set eyes on what devastation had been wrought, on the totality of the destruction. It was more than just the detonation of multiple nuclear weapons across a vast swath of the country; it was the long-lasting effects of the fallout, the decimation of the ozone layer—or "ozone process," he now knew—and the contamination of what seemed to be the entire biosphere. Even beneath the heavy mantle of his despair, Mulligan had still thought—had still *hoped*—that humanity had managed to persevere. But after laying eyes on the skeletal remains of cities and towns and not seeing so much as a single *bird* in the cobalt skies, the small ember of hope he carried was virtually extinguished.

*We're all that's left*, he thought.

He glanced across the small aisle and saw Eklund lying in the bunk across from him. She was awake, but as soon as he looked in her direction, she closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep, probably depending on the dim light to hide her indiscretion.

Mulligan snorted. "Something on your mind, Lieutenant?" he asked, raising his voice over the engine noise.

She didn't answer, apparently choosing to believe that if she pretended to be asleep, he would let her be. Mulligan considered pressing it, but settled for twisting over onto his other side and presenting her with his back. Regardless, he felt her gaze on him again and knew she was watching him as if he was on display.

*Just another animal in the zoo*, he thought.

"Go to sleep, Lieutenant," he said. And then he closed his eyes and followed his own order.



**A**T LONG LAST, the two SCEVs made their way across the Sierra Nevada mountain range and into the smaller foothills that surrounded the Santa Clara Valley. Andrews and Mulligan were once again helming SCEV Four, the sixth time they had shared the rotation. Andrews found that the big sergeant major's disposition hadn't changed greatly during their time together, though he did continue to restrain himself from engaging in any non-mission discussions. Not that there was a lot to talk about it; even though Andrews was greatly interested in Mulligan's history with Rachel and her parents, it was clear he wasn't going to get anything out of the older man. Beyond discussing the vistas outside the rig's viewports or the texture of the landscape revealed by the terrain-mapping radar, Andrews had little choice but to leave Mulligan to his own devices.

Early in the afternoon of the sixth day after leaving Harmony Base, the rigs made it to the valley.

Andrews brought the rig to a halt on the valley's rim. From the corner of his eye, he saw SCEV Five slowly ease to a stop beside them.

Below them lay the weathered skeleton of San Jose, California. Parts of the city were mounded over by great dunes of sand; others had been blackened by long-extinguished fires that left almost nothing behind. It was obvious the city had suffered at least one direct ground strike, for they could see a large crater that was ringed by layers of shattered debris that age and weather had made virtually unidentifiable. The rotting husks of cars and trucks lay scattered about and, in the distance, Andrews thought he could see the twisted skeleton of a downed airliner laying in the dusty emptiness of a street from which all structures had been blasted away. To the north, the cities of Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, and Cupertino were vague and indistinct, hidden behind veils of wind-blown dust.

Andrews took in the vista and let his breath out in one long, drawn-out sigh. Leona slipped into the cockpit and knelt between the seats. She stared out of the viewports, and Andrews glanced at her. Her expression was blank and unreadable, revealing nothing of her internal thoughts. Andrews looked beyond her, to where Mulligan sat in the copilot's seat. He was surprised to see a glimmer of emotion in the big man's eyes, which he tried to conceal immediately when he realized Andrews was watching him.

"Come here before the war, Sergeant Major?"

Mulligan snorted and turned away, looking out the viewport to his right. "Yeah. Hasn't changed much, I see."

Leona glanced at Mulligan as well, and her brow furrowed. She seemed to sense the man's internal turmoil and she looked to Andrews, as if seeking guidance. Andrews shrugged and shook his head.

*Don't bother with it, Lee.*

Leona looked back at Mulligan again, then reached forward and grabbed the control yoke for the forward-looking infrared system. She panned the FLIR from left to right, watching the imagery it returned in a small window on the center display. She stopped the device's slew suddenly and made a curious sound in her throat. Andrews glanced down at the display as she thumbed the zoom.

Framed in the small picture was a short, twisted tree with pale green leaves.

"Life," Leona said.

Mulligan looked at the display and cackled suddenly. "My God, is that all we get? That thing's twice as ugly as Charlie Brown's Christmas tree."

"It'll do, Mulligan," Andrews said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. "It'll do."

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The rigs picked their way down into the valley, pushing the wrecked hulks of dead cars out of their way as they sidled down the remains of a cracked street. On either side of the roadway, the dilapidated remains of tract housing stood silent watch over the vehicles' progression. Many of them had been flash-burned by the nuclear blast that had hit the area, and the ensuing shockwave had ripped off roof tiles, broken windows, and shattered chimneys, but for the most part, the structures had fared well. They were lifeless and uninhabited, of course. While the instruments indicated the radiation level was substantially lower in this part of California than it was in the Midwest, they would have been absolutely lethal even in the short term for several years after the war. Andrews watched one Mediterranean-style house slip by as the SCEV trundled past, its windows missing, the tattered remnants of what had once been über-expensive drapes flapping about in the mild breeze. The dwelling had likely cost millions of dollars, but its construction was cheap and its walls thin, so there was little doubt it had extended the lives of its occupants by only minutes, if that.

Finally, when the two vehicles had picked their way through the shattered city's outskirts and into the municipality itself, Andrews brought SCEV Four to a halt.

"Five, this is Four. Over."

Jim Laird's voice came over the radio immediately. "Go ahead, Four."

"We'll push on ahead and see if we can find the target site for those supports. You folks hold here and wait for us to report back. We'll be in protective posture four at all times. You getting our transponder data? Over."

"Roger that, Four. We're getting everything. Uh, you sure it's wise to split up at this time?"

Andrews looked over at Mulligan. "Sarmajor, opinion?"

Mulligan shook his head. "Your wife is in Five, and she's the subject matter expert for the supports we need, so it makes sense to play pathfinder for them."

"Hooah." Into the radio, he said, "Yeah, Five, this is how we'll play it. If we run into any trouble, you'll be the first to know. Over."

"Roger, Four. We'll stand overwatch here."

"Later, Jim."

"Happy trails, Mike."

"Walters is going to love the nonstandard radio communications," Mulligan said. "You do know he listens to the recordings?" Like all the measurements taken by the rig's instruments, radio communications were likewise recorded, stored in one of the rig's many black boxes.

"Screw him." Andrews pushed forward on the control column. The SCEV slowly accelerated down the road, leaving the other rig behind.

"That's the spirit, Captain." Mulligan was smiling faintly when Andrews glanced over at him, but he didn't say anything further.

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Andrews drove on, cutting through streets and vacant lots where he could, or using the SCEV to batter through old, dead traffic when necessary. The rigs were built to be as tough as tanks and, so long as he didn't do anything stupid, SCEV Four could take the punishment he was giving it. If the rather strenuous workout of pushing through tons of pitted sheet metal and delaminating fiberglass bothered him at all, Mulligan said nothing. He merely divided his time between monitoring the instruments and keeping an eye out for any obstacles Andrews might have missed.

It was during one of those times that Mulligan slapped the lockout switch on the center console and seized the copilot's control column. Andrews was locked out; the controls on his side of the cockpit were frozen in place. Mulligan stomped on the brakes and wrenched the rig hard to the left without any warning. Andrews heard Spencer shout from the rear of the SCEV, where he was still getting some rack time. He hoped the crew chief had strapped himself into the bunk, otherwise he would be bouncing all over the place.

"Mulligan, what gives?" Andrews demanded when the SCEV shuddered to a halt amidst a spreading cloud of dust.

Mulligan pointed out the viewport. "Sinkhole."

Andrews saw a clump of cars on the roadway ahead of him. The street canted down the face of a small hill, and the vehicles were piled up near the base, as if they'd all been caught in the same accident.

"I don't see—"

"Look past the cars, Captain." As he spoke, Mulligan slowly reversed the rig back up the hill. Andrews leaned forward and peered through the thick glass. Sure enough, just on the other side of the pileup, he could see a yawning maw of blackness. It was just barely visible, but when he knew where to look, there it was.

"Holy shit."

"Don't sweat it, sir. I'm sure you would've figured it out before we went over the edge and woke up taking harp lessons from Saint Pete." Mulligan continued reversing the rig as Spencer practically leapt into the cockpit.

"What the *fuck* is going on, Sarmajor?" he bellowed before Andrews could say anything.

"Hello, Sergeant Spencer. Come up to critique my parallel parking skills?"

"Spencer, Mulligan just stopped me from killing all of us," Andrews said as Spencer sucked in air to reply. Spencer considered his words for a moment.

"Yeah, like how?"

"I almost drove us into a sinkhole. Mulligan saw the danger and acted."

"Oh. Well, good job then, Sarmajor. Happy to have you onboard."

"Shut up and go back to sleep, sweetheart." Mulligan brought the SCEV to a gentle halt. He turned and looked back at Spencer with hard eyes. "And the next time you take issue with something I've done, I strongly urge you to discover the proper tone of voice to take when you bring it to my attention, son."

Spencer looked at Mulligan for a long moment before a big, shit-eating grin slowly spread across his face. "Hooah, Sarmajor." Even Spencer, who was about as sensitive to the human condition as a water pump, could figure out that screwing around with Mulligan was a fast road to hell.

"Okay, I'll take it again, Sergeant Major." Andrews reset the lockout switch and grabbed the control column on his side of the cockpit. "Unless you have any problems with that?"

Mulligan cut his eyes over to Andrews. "None at all, sir. But I'd recommend you take that left there"—he indicated the direction with his big chin—"and follow it for another hundred meters or so before swinging a right. The manufacturing complex should be a few clicks away. You still here, Sergeant Spencer?"

"Gone," Spencer said, ducking out of the cockpit in a hurry.

"Mulligan, stop fucking with my crew," Andrews said softly as he checked the moving map display. Sure enough, an alternate route to the manufacturing complex had been highlighted.

"How am I doing that, sir? Spencer wasn't just out of line, he was annoying at the same time. That's a transgression no one should forgive."

"If anyone's going to discipline the crew, it'll be me." Andrews brought the SCEV into a left turn. The big rig bumped up and down as it rolled over a small economy car that hadn't moved in a decade.

Mulligan stared at Andrews for one long moment, then shrugged. "Sure thing, sir."

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Almost an hour later, SCEV Four finally rolled up to the manufacturing complex. Like every other structure they had seen over the past few hours, the buildings of the manufacturing complex were extremely weathered, having suffered blast damage from the strike that had hit San Jose. Andrews slowly circumnavigated the complex, looking at the sagging chain-link fence surrounding it. The fence was topped with coiled concertina wire, essentially a whirl of razor blades that, while weather-beaten, still looked sharp enough for a shave.

Leona ducked inside the cockpit. "So this is it, huh?"

"The sign says it all, Lieutenant." Mulligan pointed toward a large, badly peeling sign that read WHITNEY MANUFACTURING, INC.

"Yeah, that does make it pretty obvious, doesn't it?" Leona leaned forward and looked past Andrews's head. "That long building there must be the warehouse."

Andrews nodded and ran his fingers through his hair. Even though the rig carried enough water for them to take the occasional quick shower, he still felt dirty and grimy. "Roger that, we'll start there. I guess we'll just crash what's left of the fence." He slowed the SCEV and turned toward the sidewalk. The rig jounced slightly as its big tires met the curb, then it smashed right through the fence. Andrews worried briefly about the razor wire slashing open a tire so badly that the self-sealing compound inside it might fail to do its job, but when the tire pressure system didn't indicate anything even remotely approaching a leak, he allowed himself to relax. He kept his eyes sharp and moved his head on a swivel, scanning the area for anything that could threaten the rig as it rolled across the facility's cracked, empty parking lot. From the corner of his eye, he saw Mulligan doing the same thing. There was a metallic *click* as the sergeant major relaxed his harness's shoulder straps and leaned forward, half-turning in his seat to look out the rear of the vehicle. When he leaned back, he caught Andrews's eye.

"It's always wise to check the flanks, sir," he said.

Leona laughed. "You think there's anyone out here who's going to try and harm us, Sergeant Major?"

"I have no idea, Lieutenant. But it's wise to presume there is."

Leona laughed again, and Andrews nudged her with his elbow.

"This is what Mulligan's here for," he told her. "Knock off the pissy attitude, Lee."

Leona looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. With a blank face, she slipped out of the cockpit and returned to her station. Mulligan shot Andrews a thumbs-up, then went back to his scans.

Andrews brought the vehicle to a halt by the loading docks and pressed the red TRANSMIT switch on the control column. "Five, you copy?"

Laird's voice came back a moment later, marred slightly by the hiss of static. The air was still full of charged particles, and radio communications would become progressively more unreliable the further away the vehicles were from each other. "Standing by, Four. Over."

"Yeah, listen Five, we found the complex. We'll have to enter some structures, so I'm going to bet we'll lose voice comms for a while. I'll try and keep you updated every hour. Is that good by you? Over."

"Roger, Four. Hourly updates are good from our side."

"Outstanding. I sent you the route we took to get here, did you get a chance to review it?"

"We have it, Four. Both myself and my XO checked it out. Seems simple enough, and the computer tells us we can make it to your location in about forty minutes if we take our time. I'm presuming you left us a nice path? Over."

"Roger that, Five. Just follow the crushed vehicles and the tire tracks in the dust. You have a fix on our pos? Over."

"We have your pos as Latitude North, 37 degrees, 19 minutes 47.0316 seconds, Longitude West, 121 degrees, 53 minutes, 19.7736 seconds. How's that?"

Andrews chuckled but confirmed the coordinates anyway. "That's pretty precise, Jimbo."

"Hey, we aim to please."

“Roger that. We’ll be suiting up and heading out now. We’ll update you before we leave the rig, then hit you every hour afterwards. Over.”

“Roger your last, Four. Happy hunting, and we hope to hear good news soon. You give the word, and I’ll bring in the SME to verify your findings and we’ll be on our way home. Over.”

“From your lips to God’s ear, Jim. SCEV Four, out.” Andrews set the parking brake and looked at Mulligan. “All right, Sarmajor. Let’s go through the shutdown checklist, and then let’s get suited up and ready for action.”

“Highly motivated, sir,” Mulligan said, though his tone indicated he was anything but.

THE CLAMSHELL DOORS on the SCEV's starboard side opened. The lower half formed a brief ramp to the ground while the upper half tried valiantly to shade the occupants of the cramped airlock from the blazing sun, which hung high overhead. Andrews walked down the three steps to the bone-dry asphalt and felt the day's heat immediately, even through his protective suit and respirator. Mulligan was right behind him, holding his assault rifle at low ready. Andrews thought it was kind of dumb bringing weapons with them, since the chances of anyone surviving out here were simply astronomical, but the gargantuan NCO had insisted. Because security was his territory, Andrews had relented. He'd had to argue with Leona for a minute, since she was convinced it was plain nuts to carry an assault rifle around under the circumstances, but even she had to give in when Mulligan planted himself in front of the inner airlock door and declared no one would leave the vehicle unarmed.

That had ended the discussion.

Behind them, the airlock doors closed. For the next two minutes or so, Andrews and Mulligan were on their own while the airlock was sterilized; only after it had been scrubbed of possible contaminants would Eklund and Spencer be allowed to progress through it to join them. Andrews looked around, the visor of his full-face respirator polarizing against the brightness of the day.

"Well, California's still sunny," he said via his voice-activated transceiver. Everyone had transceivers in their suits. It certainly beat shouting to be heard beneath all the gear they carried.

"Some things, even nuclear wars can't change," Mulligan said. "You sure we shouldn't leave Spencer with the rig? He's the crew chief, after all."

"I want to be operational, Sarmajor," Spencer said over the radio—even though he and Leona were still inside the rig, they could still monitor the suit frequencies. "Besides, I want to stretch my legs a bit."

Mulligan looked over at Andrews. "Sir?"

Andrews sighed. Doctrinally, leaving the rig unattended wasn't wise, even though access could only be gained by entering the access code on the keypad next to the airlock door. But Spencer might be useful; he was the closest thing they had to an engineer. "No one's alive to mess with the rig, Sarmajor," he said.

"Roger that, sir." Mulligan slowly turned in a circle, taking in the entire area in one long scan.

Andrews felt like he was loafing, so he did the same, then wondered why he cared what Mulligan might think of him. At any rate, the two men found nothing even vaguely threatening beyond the day's dry heat. Andrews took it upon himself to do a quick walk-around of the SCEV, checking for any damage. The rig was filthy, covered entirely with a thick coating of dust, save for the electronic probes and viewports,

which had been treated with an anti-static compound that prevented the dust from accumulating. Except for the grime, the hardy vehicle seemed to be in perfect condition. He even checked the tires for any sign of tearing from the concertina wire they'd driven over, but he found nothing worthy of anxiety. No leaks, no gouges, no indications of anything burning away, seizing up, or falling off.

When he moved back to the right side of the rig, the airlock doors opened again. Spencer and Leona emerged from the rig's cool interior, wearing their white environmental suits, air tanks, full-face respirators, and carrying Heckler and Koch M416A3 assault rifles. Knapsacks slung over their shoulders contained whatever they might need to crack open a crate or shipping container: hammers, screwdrivers, crowbars.

It didn't take long for Spencer to start bitching. "Damn, think it's hot enough?"

"Yeah man, but it's a dry heat," Mulligan said.

"That's a line from that old movie *Aliens*, right, Sarmajor?"

"I guess nothing slips past you, Copernicus."

"Yeah, well, we won't be having this funny repartee if one of us passes out from dehydration, Sarmajor."

Mulligan sighed wistfully. "Please, God, let it be me."

Leona made a disgusted sound as she pushed past the two men and tried a nearby door. It was apparently locked, and even though she shoved herself against it, she couldn't get it to budge. Andrews hurried over and tried it as well, but the door was definitely locked. It was a metal fire door, too. He sighed and looked down at the loading dock doors, but they were closed and quite likely locked as well.

"Well, I guess we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way." He reached into his knapsack and pulled out a crowbar.

"Tell you what, Captain. Let's go total old school, instead." Mulligan steered Andrews off to one side and handed him his assault rifle. He motioned Leona to stand clear, and she moved back a few steps. She looked at Andrews, who merely shrugged at her.

"How old school are we talking about, Sarmajor?"

Without answering, Mulligan walked to the door and kicked it down, almost tearing it from its hinges. He stepped to one side and peered into the darkness, minimizing his profile and being careful not to silhouette himself against the bright day. Again, Andrews thought the big man was overdoing things a bit, but after that display of strength, he didn't want to bitch too loudly.

Finally satisfied all was well, Mulligan returned to Andrews and reclaimed his assault rifle. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the severely dented door.

"I learned that in Special Forces," he said proudly.

"You must've been the toast of the dinner party circuit," Leona said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Indeed, I was."

"All right, all right, let's get going." Andrews slung his rifle over his shoulder by its patrol strap and stepped toward the door. He leaned into the darkness beyond and found it to be quite gloomy even after his visor brightened. He pulled a flashlight from his belt and snapped it on, panning the bright LED beam across the area as he



stepped inside the warehouse and moved to his left. Mulligan was the next one in, and he held his assault rifle at the ready, the stock pressed against his right shoulder, the barrel pointed at the dusty concrete floor. The interior of the warehouse was dark and gloomy, the only light coming from several holes that had been ripped through the roof. Crates were everywhere, mostly stacked atop one another. Some had fallen to the floor and burst open, spilling their contents. Andrews walked up to one and examined the spillage. He couldn't tell what the objects were, only that they weren't what they were looking for.

"Okay, we've only got two hours of air on hand, so let's make the most of it. Mulligan, head for that office down there and look for a stock manifest that might tell us what's where."

"Roger that."

"Lee, you and Spence split up and poke around. Don't rip your suits. It's still hot enough around here that you'll wind up shaving some years off your life if you're exposed for more than a day or so, so take it seriously."

"Oh, hell yeah," Spencer said.

Leona played her flashlight around. "Let's just get going, all right? This place gives me the creeps."

"You're not going to get all *girly* on us now, are you, LT?" Spencer asked.

"What, afraid someone's going to compete with you for the Miss Universe crown, Spencer?" Mulligan asked. Leona laughed at the unexpected support, and Spencer shook his head sourly.

"And from a fellow enlisted man, no less," Spencer said.

"Everyone clear on their orders?" Andrews asked, smiling.

Everyone reported their assent.

"Okay, then. Like the lieutenant said, let's get to it."

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With empty eye sockets, the nearly mummified corpse in the office's single chair grinned at Mulligan as he slowly pushed open the door and stepped inside. The sight of the skeletal remains chilled him and, for a moment, he stood paralyzed in the office doorway. He had automatically raised his rifle into an attack posture and pointed it at the human remnants, which sat half-slumped over in the chair. Most of the skin was gone, giving the sergeant major a good opportunity to inspect the corpse's many dental implants. Mulligan slowly lowered his rifle and released a quiet sigh, then stepped into the office and looked down at the skeleton. On the dust-covered desk stood an equally dusty drinking glass and a small pill bottle. Both were empty. Mulligan picked up the pill bottle and squinted, trying to make out the label, but the ink was another casualty of war. He placed the bottle back on the desk, then glanced at the computer sitting nearby. For sure, the entire warehouse's contents were there, written to a hard drive system that had probably been wiped clean by the electromagnetic pulse that shut down the entire city's power grid when the first nuke detonated. That meant the electronic search was over before it had even started. With

no other recourse available, Mulligan pawed through the desk drawers, ignoring the leering skeleton. He found nothing of any great interest.

*Hell, not even some pornography. Who ran this place, Jesuit priests?*

He turned to the file cabinet behind him and found it was locked. He tried all the drawers, but with the same result. He considered his options: go through the keys in the desk, trying each one, or blast away the lock with his rifle. He elected to conserve ammunition and went for the keys instead. The lock was old and desiccated, but he found the proper key and forced it to turn in the cylinder. The cabinet drawers squeaked loudly as he pulled them open, and he searched through the green folders inside. Eventually, he grew weary of thumbing through them one by one, so he pulled an armful out of one drawer and dropped them on the desk. He shoved the office chair out of the way and it spun into a wall, unceremoniously dumping the rag-clad skeleton to the filthy floor. Bone rattled against concrete in a macabre, atonal symphony.

*Sorry, Charlie.*

Mulligan studied the pile of folders. He knew the series number of the parts he was looking for, but it took him a few minutes to figure out the files were organized by customer, not product.

*So who was the customer? US Government? US Army? Harmony Base? Just plain old Uncle Sugar?*

Mulligan returned to the filing cabinet and went through the last one. Sure enough, there were several folders marked *USG*.

*Close enough for government work.*

It took another five minutes, but he finally found what he was looking for. Shining his flashlight on the yellowed paper, he nodded to himself.

"All right, listen up! Whoever's nearest to aisle fourteen, section C, gets a free ride home," he announced over his transceiver.

"Say again?" Andrews responded. Mulligan snorted soundlessly and shook his head. Jesus, but these kids needed everything spelled out for them.

"Core supports, Captain. According to the manifest I've found, there are twenty-four of 'em in here. Aisle one-four, section charlie."

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Outside in the warehouse itself, Spencer found himself, somewhat auspiciously, in aisle fourteen. Shining his flashlight around the cavernous warehouse, he walked hurriedly down the aisle. He was in section B, which if the alphabet still worked, meant the next section would be C.

And then there they were, right on a pallet on the ground. Several large metal shipping containers and, stenciled on their sides in faded yellow paint, was the legend that made him feel *coup de coeur* for the first time:

CORE SUPPORTS MIL-STD-344 PROPERTY US GOVERNMENT

"Roger, Sarmajor—I got 'em!" he said jubilantly, practically flying toward the first crate. He pulled a crowbar from his knapsack and went to work on the latches that held the lid in place. They weren't locked, but exposure to the elements had left them

somewhat corroded, and he didn't want to risk ripping open his suit and exposing himself to the radiation content inside the warehouse—even though the instruments back in the SCEV had rated it was enough to cause harm after only a day of continuous exposure, the last thing Spencer wanted was to dose himself and wake up the next morning with nine heads, three arms, and no dick. Caution was the order of the day.

He was so focused on the task that he didn't notice the figures step out of the gloom from behind him until they were literally right on top of him. By then, it was too late.

A bolt of light exploded behind his eyes. He heard the crowbar sing as it fell to the concrete floor, and a curious buzzing noise flitted through his ears—he recognized it an instant later as Andrews's voice over the radio. Then the light faded from his eyes, and Spencer was left in darkness so absolute that he couldn't even scream.

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"You all right, Spence?" Andrews asked when he heard the sound of metal on concrete. He was at the far side of the warehouse, but he had already started toward the crew chief's position when Mulligan relayed the location of the core supports. He heard a sharp intake of breath over his radio earpiece but, other than that, there was no response.

"Spencer? What's going on?" Andrews started moving faster, shining his own flashlight around the area. He stepped into aisle fourteen; to his left was the office and way the team had entered, to his right a patchwork of darkness broken by sunlight streaming through structural damage.

On the concrete floor, the sterile glare of an LED flashlight illuminated the bottom of several shipping crates. Andrews hurried toward the light, still holding his own flashlight in his right hand and his crowbar in his left. A small voice in the back of his mind suggested that he might be better off with his rifle in hand, but he ignored it. Spencer might have fallen and gotten hurt, but there was no need to go to guns on him. Spencer's flashlight and crowbar lay on the dusty concrete, practically right next to each other.

*What the fuck?*

He looked around, but there was no sign of Spencer. The dust around the pile of shipping containers was disturbed, and Andrews had no problem seeing the tread from Spencer's boots ingrained in the light coating of earth, but there were other prints there as well, prints that extended toward the rear of the warehouse ...

"Eklund, what's your position?" He slipped his crowbar back into his knapsack and grabbed his rifle. There was a rail system on the weapon's forestock, where he was able to mount the flashlight so he could handle the weapon with both hands. But the LED beam seemed suddenly insufficient. Despite the occasional hole in the roof high overhead that admitted shafts of bright sunlight, there were far too many shadows throughout the warehouse.

"Far end of the warehouse, near the loading doors," Leona reported. "What's happened? Is Spencer hurt?"

"I don't know. I've found his flashlight and crowbar, but no sign of him. Looks like there might have been a struggle over here ... lots of prints in the dust, and they're headed your way, Lee." Andrews kept the buttstock of his M416 pressed against his right shoulder, panning the barrel across his path. "Mulligan, what's your twenty?"

Mulligan's response was terse and flat. "Far end of the warehouse from Eklund. Closing on her position. Over."

"Roger that. Lee, stay put. We're heading for you," Andrews said, "but lock and load and get your back against something. I don't think we're alone here."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding, Lieutenant. Get into a defensive posture and wait for us."

The undercurrent of reluctance was all too plain in Leona's voice when she replied. "All right, all right. But this had better not be some sort of stupid test or—*oh, God!*"

A single gunshot tore through the darkened warehouse, startling Andrews even though he thought he was on the alert. Over the radio, he heard the sounds of Leona struggling with something; she made a small mewling sound, then the link went silent on her end. Andrews picked up the pace, running now, the adrenaline coursing through his system. His lungs burned as if he couldn't get enough air, even though the respirator continued to deliver what he needed on demand, the soft hiss of its operation barely audible. Despite his weapon and his training, Andrews felt suddenly vulnerable.

"Leona! Leona, report!"

There was no answer.

He bore down on what he believed to be her last position, but there was no evidence that Leona Eklund had even existed. She must have moved to a different spot, obeying his order to find a more defensible position until he and Mulligan could get to her. Andrews looked at the dusty floor, searching for any sign of where she might have been. He saw a single pair of footprints one aisle over, and he hurried over to them. They were definitely boot prints, and the tread matched his own.

"Mulligan, where are you?" he asked as he followed the trail. Ahead, he could see signs of a scuffle, and what looked like drag marks. Andrews passed through a shaft of bright sunlight, and the glare dazzled him. Gleaming in the light at his feet was a single brass cartridge from a 5.56-millimeter round. He saw no evidence of blood, so he had no idea if Leona had hit her target or not.

"Heading your way, Captain. I take it Eklund's missing as well? Over." If the big sergeant major was feeling any stress, it didn't come through in his voice. To Andrews, Mulligan sounded all business, as if he was doing something trivial, like taking out the garbage or giving a weather report.

"Looks that way. I've found signs of a struggle and some drag marks. I'm following them now. I'm about seventy-five meters from our point of entry." As he spoke, Andrews continued following the trail through the dust. Sweat ran down his back, making him feel like ants were marching between his shoulder blades. He fought off the urge to shudder.

"Negative. Halt where you are and take a fighting position. I'm on the other side of the warehouse from you—I'll be there in two minutes. Take cover and wait. We'll track Spencer and Eklund together."

Movement to Andrews's right caused him to stop and spin around. The flashlight's bright beam revealed a pair of glittering eyes peering out at him from beneath a shaggy pile of filthy dark hair. There was so much grime on the pockmarked face that Andrews couldn't tell if it was male or female, but the eyes burned with a curious combination of intelligence, fear, and disgust.

"Don't move! Remain where you are!" Andrews shouted, pointing the weapon directly at the shadowy figure. As soon as he was oriented into the fighting posture, the figure ducked and leaped behind a pile of crates, moving with the speed and dexterity of a cat. The figure was small and lithe—a child or a small woman? He moved his finger from alongside his rifle's lower receiver frame to the trigger. He had kept the weapon indexed since the safety was off, as he didn't want to accidentally shoot anyone friendly. But now, he was ready for business.

"Andrews, give me a SITREP. Over." There was a hint of emotion in Mulligan's voice now.

Andrews stepped toward where the figure had stood, crouching slightly, rifle tight against his shoulder. "We're not alone here, Sarmajor—"

As he spoke, more shapes swam through the gloom on either side of him. Andrews reacted, spinning to go to guns on the threat to his right, but something slammed into him from behind. Andrews cried out as he was flung face-first into a metal shelving unit. The durable plastic visor on his facemask cracked, and the impact was hard enough to allow some air to leak out through the seal around his face. Ignoring the possible contamination, he threw himself away from the metal obstruction and tried to spin around. At the same time, more figures piled onto him, laying him out on his chest and trapping his assault rifle beneath his body. Hands tore at him; in an instant, the mask was ripped from his face. Andrews yelled Mulligan's name, then something struck him in the side of his head with so much force that he saw stars.

Then the world went black.

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Mulligan had moved to the far side of the warehouse upon leaving the office, moving as quickly and furtively as he could. His situational awareness was low—all he had to go on was what the others had reported. As their numbers diminished and he failed to generate any actionable intelligence from Andrews's reports, the big Special Forces soldier could reach only one conclusion: he was utterly fucked.

"Andrews, SITREP."

No answer.

"Andrews, give me a click of your microphone if you can't speak."

His radio earpiece remained silent, not even a vague hiss of background static. Everyone was off the air, which meant he was the last man standing. The others were armed and had been taken down with silent rapidity, which likely meant that Mulligan was not only fucked, he was quite possibly severely outnumbered, as well as having the dubious honor of being the next target the opposing force was looking to service.

He kept the warehouse wall to his back. He realized he had made a tactical error by moving deeper into the structure to maneuver himself closer to the action and

perhaps outflank the attackers. But he hadn't expected the others to be taken so quickly, and practically without a fight. That could only mean overwhelming numbers and substantial coordination. To get back to the entrance—and to the SCEV—he would either have to backtrack or cut through the center of the warehouse.

Where the others had been taken.

*That's a non-starter.*

He turned and slowly began to pick his way back the way he had come, taking great care to move as silently as possible. In this situation, stealth was superior to speed. The gloomy interior of the warehouse worked to his adversaries' advantage. No doubt they knew its layout quite well, otherwise their ambushes wouldn't have been so flawless. With that thought in mind, Mulligan switched off his flashlight. The return path was relatively free of obstructions, so he wouldn't need the light to help him skirt around anything in his path. Even though there were areas in the warehouse where shadows grew dark and deep, he would stick to the near-twilight areas, where he stood a chance of seeing an attacker closing on him.

As he walked, he became hyper-aware of the sounds inside the warehouse. Wind whispering through the holes in the structure. Sporadic creaks as the warehouse settled. The soft scuffling of *things* moving somewhere in the gloom.

And those scuffling noises seemed to be drawing closer.

*Outstanding.*

"SCEV Five, this is Mulligan. We need immediate evac. Over." Even though the other rig was miles away and the suit transceivers didn't have the power to reach it through the covering structure of the warehouse, Mulligan hoped that Laird or the others would at least catch *something*. Even a fragmented sentence or a series of clicks might cause them to come in. Jim Laird was extremely conservative, the kind of small unit commander who could be counted on to follow orders and never do anything that too risky, but this mission was far different from anything he had been given before—would he be able to break the mold and rise to the challenge? Mulligan wasn't counting on it, but Kelly Jordello, SCEV Five's XO, was a real firecracker and had an intuitive grasp of tactical situations her commander lacked. Then there was Tony Choi, the Korean kid who was all goofy on the outside but who had a core of hard steel he kept tucked away where no one could see. Even though she wasn't military, Rachel Andrews had a lot riding on this, too. After all, her husband was out here with the man who had murdered her parents, so a fragmented transmission might get her dander up ...

There was no reply. Mulligan repeated his call as he kept falling back, his head on a swivel, alert and vigilant. He repeated the call, but the result was the same—unbroken silence.

A sudden sound from above made him whirl. A vaguely humanoid shape leapfrogged across the stacked crates, passing from shadow to shadow like some kind of demented gymnast. It moved with an almost simian grace, deeply unnerving Mulligan. Was it even human?

He didn't pause to consider that he might be surrounded by monsters. He simply raised his rifle and squeezed off two rounds—*crack-crack!*—with a practiced ease that was still second nature to him, even though he hadn't fired a weapon in anger in over

a decade. His skills were still up to par, for he watched the figure jerk and spin as the steel-jacketed NATO rounds found their target. It howled as it tumbled off a stack of crates and crashed to the floor, where Mulligan couldn't see it. As he moved to his right, his foot hit something—a large chunk of concrete. He glanced down at it, then quickly stepped back to his left.

He stood on the edge of a large hole in the concrete floor. Its presence puzzled him for a moment, until he saw something moving in the opening's black depths. He was surprised to find a filthy human face peering up at him. It wasn't just a hole. It was a *tunnel*.

Mulligan brought his rifle to bear, but the man in the tunnel shrieked and darted back into the darkness.

Stealth was no longer going to cut it. As the sounds of movement grew louder throughout the warehouse, drawing nearer, the big Green Beret broke into a run.

THE SUN WAS low in the sky, bathing the shattered city in fiery light that was beginning to turn a brilliant shade of orange. That was the thing about nuclear exchanges, Jim Laird thought as he piloted SCEV Five down a dusty avenue. They left enough contaminants in the air to refract the light in such a way that they doubled the beauty of a sunrise or sunset.

"SCEV Four, this is SCEV Five. Can you copy? Andrews, Eklund, Spencer, Mulligan, kick it back. Over," he said into his headset as he steered the big rig down the same streets SCEV Four had taken over two hours ago. He gripped the control column in his left hand, and the instrument felt slick beneath his fingers. Laird was sweating, despite the cool air blowing over him from the vents overhead.

"We should have gone in with them," Choi said suddenly. He sat in the right seat, dividing his attention between the instruments and the view outside.

"Yeah, no kidding. Unfortunately, Andrews is the mission commander, and he told us to stay," Laird snapped. He regretted his tone immediately. Choi normally served with Andrews and Eklund and Spencer, so of course he would be worried about the sudden silence that had descended over the comms. When Laird had insisted they hold station for another half hour, just in case Andrews and the others were delayed for some harmless reason, Choi and Rachel Andrews had been pretty direct in voicing their displeasure. Even Kelly had questioned the decision, though not aloud. Laird had only to look at her eyes to get that, but he had held firm. Andrews and the others were probably so absorbed in looking for the supports that they had blown past the radio check. Overreacting to that wouldn't make things any easier.

"Sorry, Tony," he said lamely.

"Don't sweat it," Choi said, and Laird had to wonder if he was joking.

Rachel entered the cockpit, and Laird had to fight not to groan. She'd been the poster child for worry and despair during the entire trip, and now circumstances had conspired to make her even more tightly wound. Laird felt the weight of her stare as she knelt between the cockpit seats.

"Anything yet, Captain?"

"Not yet, Andrews. I'll let you know as soon as things change. Now go back and strap in. There's a lot of broken ground ahead, and—"

"What the fuck?" Choi said suddenly.

Laird backed off on the control column, slowing the SCEV. "What is it, Choi?"

"Check this out!" Choi tapped the center display excitedly. "According to Four's transponder, her bearing is changing. She's *moving*!"

Laird glanced down at the display. Sure enough, the rig was moving. Dead slow, but it was definitely moving. Which didn't make any sense at all.



"Could their radio be out?" Rachel asked, a glimmer of hope in her voice. "That would explain why they haven't been able to respond, right?"

Laird shook his head with a sigh as he accelerated again. "Each rig's got three separate radios with dedicated antennas. We can broadcast on VHF, FM, and HF. The chances of all three failing are ..." He reconsidered what he was saying, and who he was saying it to. With a sigh, he glanced over at Rachel and gave her a jerky smile. It was the best he could do at the moment.

"Ah ... yeah, Andrews. They could be NORDO. Maybe that's it."

Choi was apparently oblivious to what he was trying to do. "Whatever, sir, but the engineering uplink says she's on standby, and the rig's engine isn't running. Even if they were moving on auxiliary, the entire system wouldn't be in standby. For instance, the airlock doors haven't been cycled, and the security code wasn't entered—"

"Yeah, great, thanks a lot, Choi." Laird took his eyes off the road to stare daggers at the younger man. "You're a big help, man. Keep it up."

"*Watch out!*" Rachel screamed suddenly, gripping Laird's shoulder with enough strength to hurt. Her fingers dug into his flesh hard enough to leave bruises, but the pain barely registered in Laird's mind as he snapped his eyes forward and looked out the viewports. What he saw made him swear, and both he and Choi stomped on the brakes at the same time. The big rig shuddered to a vibrating halt as its anti-lock brakes stuttered like a machine gun. Laird and Choi both reached out and grabbed Rachel at the same time, preventing her from flying into the instrument panel as the SCEV suddenly decelerated. From the back, Kelly Jordello let out a shout, and Laird heard something go flying to the floor of the second compartment.

Then everyone jerked backward as the vehicle came to a full stop and thrashed backward on its suspension. Rachel fell back onto her ass with a cry, her feet kicking up into the air. Laird ignored her and fumbled for the parking brake before hitting the quick-release on his harness. Beside him, Choi did the same. Both men stared out the viewports as a cloud of dust slowly rolled over the rig. Before it obscured their view through the thick glass, they saw a stumbling figure approach the rig, hands held high, as if in supplication.

It was Mulligan. He looked like he'd been through one hell of a fight. Laird grabbed the seat release and kicked the seat all the way back until it smacked into the bulkhead. He hauled himself out of the pilot's seat as Mulligan collapsed to the ground outside, his MOPP suit ripped and torn, his respirator assembly and facemask gone.

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Blessedly cool air whispered over Mulligan as Laird and Choi pulled him through the tight airlock and half-carried him into SCEV Five's second compartment. They'd already removed his tattered environmental suit and tossed it into the incinerator before cycling open the inner door, leaving him dressed only in his sweat-soaked Army Combat Uniform. The two men dragged Mulligan over to the faux leather settee and eased him down onto it as Kelly Jordello moved toward him with the rig's medical kit in hand.

"Gotta shower," he said to her. "I'm hot—"

Kelly shook her head, and her ponytail swayed back and forth. "Not necessary right now. You haven't been exposed for very long." She glanced at Rachel, who stood nearby. Mulligan followed her gaze and, when he saw Rachel, he could tell by the set of her jaw that she was barely hanging on to her emotions.

"Rachel, get him some water, please," Kelly said.

Rachel hesitated for a moment, then stepped over to the kitchenette and drew a cup of water from the sink. As Laird and Choi pulled off their suits, Kelly snapped on some rubber gloves and slipped on a surgical mask.

"Procedure," she said to Mulligan when he looked at her.

"Lieutenant, I need to hit the shower and decon," he said.

"You have open wounds, Sergeant Major. You'd better let me tend to those first, unless you want to scrub them out with water and bleach yourself. Are you light-headed? Nauseous? Having trouble catching your breath?"

"Well, yeah. It's been a tough couple of hours."

"You're dehydrated. Rachel, the water?" Kelly pulled out a stethoscope and unbuttoned Mulligan's soaked ACU blouse. The T-shirt beneath it was dark with sweat.

Rachel held out the cup to Mulligan. He reached for it with trembling fingers and missed it on the first try.

Kelly took the cup from Rachel and put it in Mulligan's hand. "Drink that. We'll get you loaded up with electrolytes in a bit."

Mulligan brought the cup to his lips and drank down the contents. Some slid down the wrong pipe, and he coughed mightily, almost spilling the rest all over himself.

"Take it easy, Mulligan," Laird said.

"Blow it out your ass, sir." The sound of his voice reminded him of a metal rasp being dragged across stone. "We have a bit of a situation here."

Laird apparently chose to overlook the insubordination. "Where are the others, Sergeant Major?"

"Captured, I think. Maybe even dead. I was cut off from the rig—"

"*Captured?*" Rachel said, her voice high-pitched and shrill, a perfect counterpoint to Mulligan's dry, husky rasp. "By who?"

Mulligan took a moment to drink the remainder of his water, managing not to drown himself at the same time. He cleared his throat and looked at her directly. "By survivors of the war, ma'am. Like the judge always said—when you're hot, you're hot."

Rachel stared at him for a moment as her cold dread suddenly blossomed into a hot fury. "So you just *left* them there? You ran out on them, you fucking bastard?"

Before Mulligan could formulate a reply, she was all over him, pounding him with her fists. Mulligan took the punishment. He didn't have the strength to fight her off, anyway.

"You left them! The only reason you're here is because you were supposed to watch over them, and *you left them!*"

"Rachel, get off him!" Kelly shouted, shoving her away just as Laird and Choi grabbed her shoulders and yanked Rachel back. Laird pinned her up against the sealed inner airlock door with one thick arm, pressing it under her chin. She fought against him, but Laird just increased the pressure.

"Keep this shit up, Andrews, and I'll fucking choke you out!" he bellowed, right in her face. "Get a grip—*now!*"

Rachel's lips pulled back from her teeth as she continued to fight, thrashing and kicking, but Laird was not a small man, and he was true to his word. Rachel began to choke when he put enough pressure on her airway that she couldn't take a breath. She finally relented, but it took longer than Mulligan would have thought.

*That girl's got some fire in her, for sure.*

When she began to sag, Laird quickly released her and grabbed her under the arms so she wouldn't fall to the deck. After she took several ragged gasps of air, Rachel raised her head. She didn't look at Laird; instead, she glared directly at Mulligan, and the hatred he saw in her eyes was truly impressive.

"Business as usual for you, isn't it?" she gasped.

"That's it, Andrews. Knock it off," Laird said. "Can you stand?" When Rachel finally nodded, Laird straightened. "All right, I'm going to let you go. Don't go batshit again, otherwise we'll tie you up in back. You get me?"

"Yes, Captain. I get you."

Laird slowly withdrew. After exchanging a glance with Choi, he turned back to Mulligan. It was pretty obvious even to Mulligan in his current state that Laird's mind was whirling. Finding survivors of the nuclear conflict has been Laird's mission for the past decade; now that he'd nearly realized his mission, it was too much. This was something the team just couldn't handle right now.

Still, he had to explore it.

"People?" Laird asked, finally.

"Well, I wouldn't say *that*. But there are a lot of those bastards, and they're apparently none too happy to see us." Mulligan started to laugh then, a laugh that sounded a little crazy even to him. When he saw the others staring at him as if he'd lost his marbles, he got himself under control. "I'm sorry, but it's kind of ironic, huh? We've finally found life outside of Harmony. Boy, I'll bet Benchley's going to pop a boner over this."

Laird shook his head, stunned by the news. Kelly resumed her work, listening to Mulligan's heart and taking his blood pressure.

"Jesus," Laird said after a loud sigh. "Yeah, I'd probably get a little hot and bothered over it myself, if we didn't have other things to take care of right now." He rubbed his face, then crossed his arms. "All right ... we're still getting Four's transponder signal. Whoever your new friends are, they're apparently moving the rig, but we can track it down. Hopefully, the others won't be too far from it."

"Better wait for a few hours, in that case," Mulligan said. "The bad guys'll think they're secure, and we can roll up on them using the darkness as cover."

"They could be unprotected, Sarmajor. The rad count's still high enough that continuous exposure will cause damage," Kelly said as she finished taking his vitals.

Laird nodded. "Jordello's right, Mulligan. The sooner we get our people back, the sooner we can complete our mission."

Mulligan sighed. "Excuse me, sir, but do you have a plan?"

Laird hesitated. Choi and Mulligan looked at him, waiting for an answer. Kelly pulled out cotton, gauze, swabs, and antiseptic as she prepared to clean out

Mulligan's wounds, something he wasn't looking forward to. He noticed that Rachel Andrews kept her eyes rooted on him, as if she was trying to stare holes through his head. Mulligan suddenly found that he was very tired of all the pussyfooting around, and decided to roll in for the kill.

"Listen, Captain—we have night vision devices, armored mobility, secure communications, and a fair amount of firepower at our disposal. But unless you play it smart, none of that's going to mean jack."

"So what are you suggesting, Sergeant Major?"

"I'm suggesting that I'm the only warfighter in the vehicle, so you might want to let me take the lead on this one, sir. No disrespect intended, but I'm the only one here who's already had his cherry popped, so I kind of know what we're going to have to do."

"You left them," Rachel said. "Why should we listen to you?"

"Because if they're not dead, I'll be able to get them back alive." Mulligan scowled. "Shit or get off the pot, Captain. We're danger close across the board. What's it going to be?"

Laird frowned, glaring at Mulligan, furious at being called out in front of his crew. Mulligan sympathized, as he would certainly feel the same way if their roles were reversed. But that changed nothing, and they probably had a lot of fighting ahead of them.

Laird couldn't keep the anger out of his voice. "All right, Sergeant Major. You've made your point. What first?"

"We break it down into manageable pieces and knock them out one at a time. Hiding the vehicle would be a great way to get started, sir. Get us out of the middle of this street and under cover."

Laird stared at Mulligan for another long, frosty second. Choi fidgeted, looking from one man to the other. Finally, Laird motioned to Choi.

"Get forward, Choi. Jordello, get that son of a bitch cleaned up and deconned. Once you're done, Sergeant Major, take some time to get yourself squared away, then tell us how you figure we're going to get this done, if you don't mind."

"Hooah, sir," Mulligan said.

Choi pushed past the settee and headed for the cockpit. Laird turned and followed him without saying another word and, a moment later, the rig started moving again.

"I'm going to clean your wounds, Sergeant Major. When I'm done, you can shower up."

"Roger that, Lieutenant. Do your worst." As Kelly started cleaning out the scratches on his face, Mulligan looked over at Rachel. She continued to glare at him, her arms crossed, her feet spread so she could keep her balance as the vehicle swayed slightly from side to side. Mulligan sighed and decided to try one last time to reach her.

"It's going to work out okay," he told her. "We'll get them back."

Rachel snorted and turned toward the cockpit. "They were dead the second you came aboard, Mulligan."

**W**HEN LEONA CAME to, she had a pounding headache that wouldn't quit and her right eye burned and itched horribly. She reached up to rub it, and the ensuing burst of pain left her gasping. She curled up into the fetal position for a time, trying to deal with the pain until she worked up the courage to try again. Gently, she ran her fingertips over her face and found the flesh around her left eye was tender, distended, and so swollen she couldn't even see out that eye. She felt like she'd gone five rounds with a heavyweight boxer, and she'd have one hell of a shiner to show for it, that was for sure.

Then she realized she wasn't wearing a glove on her hand.

Slowly, she unwound from her fetal position and looked around. She was on the floor of a dark, dirty room. It was devoid of any furniture, and the walls were dingy with years of accumulated filth. A small window was positioned high up on one wall, the glass there cracked. It admitted only tepid light, which was just bright enough to allow her to examine herself. Her environmental suit was ripped and torn, hopelessly compromised. And she had no respirator assembly—it was all gone, along with her radio, weapon, and knapsack. Her right hand throbbed, and she found a swollen knot on one knuckle. Had she hit someone? She tried to recall what had happened at the warehouse, but her recollections were disjointed and vague. She found her entire body ached, as if she'd been through a strenuous fight.

Then she remembered. Her last thought before the darkness had descended was finding herself suddenly surrounded by a filthy horde of shapes that moved through the warehouse gloom with a self-assured efficiency that told her they knew the layout of the building as well as the backs of their hands. Their garments were old and covered with dust and grime, and she had realized then that if it wasn't for the respirator mask she had worn, she likely would have smelled them coming.

Then they had attacked. Leona remembered squeezing off a wild shot from her rifle as rough, calloused hands grabbed her from everywhere, tearing off her facemask and ripping the weapon from her grasp. Then there had been the vicious blow to her face, the one that left her with an eye so swollen she couldn't see through it.

She looked up at the window as she slowly, gingerly, rose to her feet. She still wore her boots and uniform beneath the tattered remains of the suit, which was a step in the right direction. She stumbled toward the wall, wincing as a sudden tenderness in her hip made itself known. Leaning against the wall, she reached up toward the window, but it was too far for her to reach, much less look outside to get an idea of where she was.

From behind her, a door opened on creaking hinges.

Leona turned as quickly as she was able, keeping the wall to her back and slipping into a Shotokan karate stance, adopting an edge-on position that presented the right side of her body toward the newcomers while keeping the swelling on the left side of her face away from them. She already knew that contact with the swelling was immensely painful; the last thing she wanted was for someone to strike her there. She knew she would fold up like a rag doll.

As she had suspected, she was able to smell them coming. The fetid stink of unwashed bodies and clothing rolled into the room like a sickening tsunami. Leona felt her gorge rise but she fought it down silently, clenching her teeth together to prevent a groan from escaping her lips. She watched as several figures stepped into the room and fanned out on either side of the door, their eyes glittering in the darkness. They were dirty, grime-covered people, two men and one woman, while the fourth was more like a shambling monstrosity. Hunchbacked and possessed of an overly large head, the hideous creature examined her with pale blue eyes. A strand of thick, ropey drool spilled out of its mouth and rolled over its insanely thick lower lip, slowly making its way to the floor. Leona gasped at the sight of the grotesquerie, almost horrified beyond belief.

*It's deformed from the radiation ... but how could something like that live?*

The deformed person burbled something in its throat, then shuffled off to one side. Leona found that she couldn't take her eyes off it.

"Don't be afraid of them, dearie," a voice said from the blackness beyond the open door. "They won't harm you."

Leona pulled her eyes off the deformity and tightened up her stance, clenching her hands into fists and then raising up before her. She watched as another figure stepped out of the deep shadow and into the nominally better light inside the small room. He was clad in dirty, threadbare clothing, but his garments seemed to be in better shape than any of the others. His hair was thinning, and his face was pockmarked with scars left from old, festering sores that had finally healed. He smiled at her, and Leona thought that he had once been a handsome man, many years ago. Now, time and the harsh post-apocalyptic environment had taken their toll. His dark brown eyes seemed to gleam with an uncanny intellect, and when he looked at her, Leona felt he could see directly into the depths of her soul.

She feared him instantly.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "I am the Law. And before you even think about it, let me tell you there's no place for you to run, even if you did manage to get out of this room. We know this city quite well, and we have your vehicle. You couldn't escape." His smile widened into a broad grin, revealing surprisingly white teeth that looked to be in fine shape. He took another step toward her, closing the distance between them to about ten feet. Leona instinctively tried to back up, but she found she was already against the wall. There was no place for her to go.

"Tell me ... who are you? Where did you come across such a useful vehicle?" the man asked. When she said nothing, he pursed his lips and feigned a crestfallen expression. "Come on, now. I'm absolutely *dying* to hear your voice."

Leona regarded him for a long moment, then slowly lowered her clenched fists. She took a tentative step toward the man who called himself the Law, and forced her

dry throat to swallow.

"Sure thing," she said, right before she launched a quick snap kick right for his face.

The man avoided the blow as if he had known it was coming. The air around him seemed to pulse suddenly, to come alive with a rising electricity that quickly filled the room. Leona had never felt anything quite like it before as it enveloped her, almost like a physical thing. Then, every nerve ending in her body exploded with pain so deep and sudden that her legs gave out. Leona screamed as she crashed to the floor, jerking in a series of agonized spasms she could not control. Her scream continued until her lungs emptied of air, then she had to fight to fill them again as bright flashes danced behind her eyes. The pain was immense, as if every cut, bump, bruise, and injury she had previously experienced was only a series of tests before the main event. Her conscious mind retreated, fleeing the pain, but found nowhere to hide.

The man seemed oblivious to her torment. "I can force you to speak, you know. How do you like the pain? Should I make it worse?"

Leona's agony suddenly doubled. She threw her head back and shrieked as she convulsed on the floor, her limbs flailing, completely out of control. She felt consciousness start to fade as tunnel vision set in, and she wondered vaguely if this was going to be the last thing she ever felt—degrees of pain she had never imagined, agony so extreme it threatened to shatter her mind.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the pain subsided. Leona gasped for air as her nerve endings slowly cooled off, radiating pain like a heat sink.

Law stepped closer to her. "You didn't enjoy it? I hadn't thought you would. But that was just one of my powers, girl. A bit crude, maybe ... like a bat against an infant's skull. Want to try something else? Something a touch more *sophisticated*. What do you say?"

Leona rolled over onto her belly. It was almost an autonomous motion, as if her body was taking charge and trying to get her away from the slender man with the bright eyes who could induce such mind-numbing pain that the very thought of enduring it once again nearly drove her mad. She tried to crawl away from him, heading for one of the room's dark corners, her muscles trembling and her joints barely moving. She let out a ragged gasp when Law stuck his foot under her belly and turned her onto her back. He stood over her, still grinning manically, his eyes agleam with something Leona couldn't identify. Madness, she decided, something she'd never seen before.

"Want to see how it all ended?" he asked in a harsh whisper. "A tour of mankind's demise? It's a definite E-ticket attraction!" He squeezed his eyes shut, as if concentrating on some difficult task. Veins suddenly stood out on his forehead, and Leona could see them pulsing with blood. The air grew electric again, and she made a small noise in the back of her throat. The pain was coming, and she knew it.

But the pain never came.

Images flashed across her mind's eye—

*An atomic warhead detonates over San Jose in an airburst of brilliant, blinding, malignant light.*

*Ear-splitting thunder cracks as streets full of people are instantly atomized, disappearing in brief puffs of flame.*

*A luminous shockwave tears across the city, shattering skyscrapers, flattening homes, tossing debris everywhere.*

*The same city, now a time-ravaged tomb.*

*Mangy, diseased dogs stalk the streets, devouring whatever is left that still bears meat; clouds of black flies descend upon thousands of bloated human corpses that lay baking in the hot sunlight.*

The images stopped as suddenly as they had started, and Leona's mind was returned to her. She found she was weeping, convulsing with great sobs of despair and sorrow at what she had seen. Was that what it had been like during the Sixty Minute War? The fear, the horror, the destruction of inescapable death? She had spent months over the past year looking at the rotting corpses of the great cities of the Midwest, their crumbling skyscrapers skeletal and gaunt, having shed their facades and panes of glass as the rest of the settlements around them decayed. Examining those cities and the remnants of small towns, the husks of what had once been country houses and farms, she had felt a vague, disconnected sorrow for what had befallen her people, her fellow Americans, and perhaps the entire human race. But that pale mourning was hardly even a drop when compared to the vast sea of grief that now consumed her. She raised her hands to her battered face and cried into her palms, unable to do anything else.

The man who called himself the Law knelt beside her, and she could feel his lips moving against her hair as he spoke, his voice a calm whisper.

"Now. Tell me who you are, where you come from, and what you're doing here."



**M**ULLIGAN SAT IN the pilot's seat of SCEV Five, the control column in his left hand as he steered the big rig through the shattered remnants of San Jose. The night was dark and deep, the only illumination coming from the cold, distant stars in the black sky. Despite the darkness, the SCEV ran without any external lighting. Mulligan had decided it would be in everyone's best interest to make the rig as difficult to detect as possible, and that meant the rig's impressive array of high intensity floodlights would remain switched off. But the darkness did not pose a substantial problem for the SCEV crew. Projected across the cockpit's forward viewports was an infrared display of the terrain ahead, which allowed Mulligan to see what lay in the rig's path as if he were a lion stalking a limping gazelle across the nighttime Serengeti.

Laird sat restlessly in the copilot's seat as Mulligan drove, staring at the same thermographic imagery. A route had been highlighted on the display, and that pale yellow line was leading them directly to where SCEV Four's active transponder said the missing SCEV could be found.

"Ah, this is a little weird," Laird said after a moment.

"Do tell," Mulligan said. He flexed his right hand against his thigh. When he'd blasted through the people who had tried to attack him in the warehouse, one of them had hit him in the hand with a piece of piping. The fourth finger on his hand had swelled up, and moving it was painfully difficult.

"Four's transponder information—the elevation value is reading negative." Laird pressed a button on the center console, and a small window opened on the infrared overlay in front of Mulligan. SCEV Four's position information was displayed in the small box and, sure enough, the elevation value was showing as negative ten meters.

"So they've taken the rig underground," Mulligan said. "Cunning bastards."

"We have detailed data files on the area. Let's see if I can come across any civil defense or zoning records that have any actionable information on the buildings in that area. You want the data window to stay open?"

"Negative, it's just making the view more cluttered."

Laird closed the window, then opened another on one of the multifunction displays in the instrument panel. Mulligan glanced over quickly, and he saw the husky captain scrolling through a map of the area.

"Bingo," Laird said after a few moments. "Says here that there's a parking garage on the next block. Right next to a civic center, and across from a light rail station."

"Same route as the one we're on?" Mulligan asked.

"Hooah, Sarmajor. We're heading right for it."

"Roger. Stay sharp, and switch off the gun safeties, if you don't mind, sir."

Laird made an affirmative noise and reached for the fire control panel. He lifted a red switch guard and flicked the toggle beneath it. When the switch moved to the

ARMED position, it made an uncharacteristically loud click, followed by a distinct tone over the cockpit speakers. Anyone trained in SCEV operations would know that the turreted machine guns on either side of the SCEV's nose had just been made operational. A red targeting reticle appeared on the viewport in front of Laird, and when he moved the grip on the center console, the reticle and the guns themselves would slew onto the designated target.

"Hot guns," Laird reported.

"Roger, hot guns. Let's see what we can see. Hang on, the road's pretty torn up out there," Mulligan said as the SCEV began to bump up and down. He slowed the rig dramatically as its knobbed tires rolled across cracked and shattered concrete. All manner of detritus lay in the street and, a moment later, Mulligan saw why. Several entire buildings had collapsed. He couldn't tell what had caused the destruction, only that it seemed to be more recent than the nuclear attack that had destroyed San Jose.

"Parking garage is down the street and on the right," Laird said. "I think I can see it—there. Looks kind of messed up, but at least it's still standing."

"I've got tracks through the rubble," Mulligan said. "Lots of them. Looks like our friends actually *towed* the rig here." As the vehicle slowly approached the parking garage, Mulligan felt his heart rate increase. If ever there was a time for an ambush, this is when it would happen. He didn't know if any of the survivors that had attacked them had weaponry capable of penetrating an SCEV but, if they did, they'd use them soon. Not that the crew had any choice in the matter; urban terrain made long-range surveillance difficult, so they had to come in close, either on foot or in the rig. They'd tried it on foot earlier in the day, and it had only resulted in the disappearance of Andrews, Spencer, and Eklund.

The tire tracks led directly to a closed metal garage door. Mulligan looked at it through the infrared overlay, but the image fidelity wasn't sufficient enough for him to determine how substantial the door was. And he wasn't going to stop and check it out personally.

"Lieutenant Jordello, take control of the FLIR turret and put eyes on the building to our right. It's a parking garage, and the entrance has been sealed off. Let me know if the door looks solid, if you would. We won't be stopping, so do it quickly."

"Roger that," Kelly said from the science station on the other side of the cockpit bulkhead. Mulligan kept the SCEV moving at just above a crawl, and he looked out the side port to his left. The night was as dark as ever, and there was no sign of any illumination. No firelight, no candlelight—nothing. If the opposing force was nearby, they were certainly adhering to strict blackout routines.

"Yeah, it looks like it's a folding metal rollup door," Kelly reported after a moment. "Seems solid enough. Quite large, though."

"They must've run semi-trucks in there," Mulligan said. "You said there's a civic center somewhere around here?"

"On the other side of the garage," Laird said.

Mulligan grunted. "Makes sense. They'd roll the big rigs in whenever they had a show and offload the trailers right into the center. Okay, let's go around the block and see what we can see."

"Maybe we should dismount," Laird suggested.

"Maybe we shouldn't," Mulligan said. "The group that attacked us, they didn't have any projectile weapons—only clubs and bats and knives. If that's all they have, then they'll have a hell of a time trying to get at us as long as we remain in the vehicle. If we had more boots with us, we could do what you suggest, but we don't. Right now, our best protection is the SCEV."

"I got you, Sergeant Major," Laird said. "But from the transponder data, SCEV Four is definitely somewhere inside there."

"I know, Captain. I know. Patience."

With that, Mulligan slowly drove around the block. He wished he felt as confident as he sounded, but he knew the situation could explode into a clusterfuck at a moment's notice. While he was comfortable with the assumption that the opposing force—OPFOR, in military parlance—didn't have much in the way of heavy weaponry, and almost certainly no antitank weaponry, there were still a dozen other ways for their night to be ruined even further. If the OPFOR managed to block off the street and prevent the vehicle from escaping, that would definitely put a damper on the presumed rescue mission.

As the rig pulled around the huge, domed civic center, the city remained quiet and dark. That made Mulligan nervous. The SCEV had doubtless made a large racket in its passage, even while operating on battery power—driving a multi-ton vehicle over rubble and not making a lot of noise was impossible. He saw no indication that anyone was going to investigate the disturbance made by the rig, but he wasn't sure if that was a positive or a negative.

*Time will tell.*

When Mulligan made to turn right on the far side of the civic center and head back for the parking garage, he brought the rig to a sudden halt. Laird let out a long sigh when he saw what lay ahead of them.

"Man, it's a good thing we didn't come the other way," Laird said.

Ahead, the street had collapsed. The concrete roadway had been transformed into millions of pieces of disjointed rubble, all of which lined the bottom of a wide crevasse. Despite the utter darkness, the infrared sensors revealed that the train station below the street had been exposed in the collapse. An old car lay upended in the rubble, its battered rear bumper gleaming in the wan starlight.

"Looks like an earthquake hit the city some time ago. That explains why this area is such a mess," Mulligan said.

"Then why would they bring SCEV Four here?" Laird asked.

"Because the place is so fucked up, no one would bother to look around here. Cagey bastards." Mulligan regarded the train station for a moment. He knew that the BART system had been extended from San Francisco all the way to southern San Jose. That there was a station stop at the civic center was no surprise.

"You know, we might be able to use that," he said, pointing at the train station.

"For what? Catching a train?"

"Ingress, Captain. Ingress. There've got to be ways inside the civic center from there, and from the civic center into the garage."

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Ten minutes later, Mulligan parked SCEV Five between two decimated buildings a block away from the civic center. He preceded Laird into the second compartment and went directly to the arms locker located near the second bulkhead. It was locked, of course; only rig commanders had the keys to the small arms. He turned to Laird and motioned him forward.

"You mind opening the locker, sir?"

Laird reached into his uniform blouse and pulled out a set of keys hanging around his neck on a thin lanyard. He opened the locker wordlessly and stepped out of the way. Mulligan removed four of the eight M416A3 rifles that were secured inside and set them on the dining settee. Then he reached further into the locker and pulled out a worn, black plastic case. It had its own lock, this one biometric.

"What's that?" Laird asked. "I don't remember that being there."

"That's because I took the liberty of placing it aboard before we left Harmony," Mulligan said. He set the case on the settee table and pressed his thumb against the biometric lock. It clicked open instantly, and Mulligan raised the case's lid on its hinges. Inside the case's foam-lined interior lay several blocks of white, putty-like substance, several blasting caps and their integral batteries, and two remote detonators. Mulligan examined the case's contents with a critical eye. The C4 was a bit long in the tooth, but it should still be functional, along with the blasting caps. He checked the radio frequency detonators—they were fully charged. Everything was just as he had left it.

"Sarmajor, are those *explosives*?" Kelly Jordello asked.

"Well, you could play around with one and find out," Mulligan said. "I like to be prepared, but I gotta tell you, I didn't think we'd need 'em. Captain, maybe you could start handing out rifles. Everyone should take at least six magazines with them. We have no idea what we'll run into."

"Roger that," Laird said. He reached past Mulligan and pulled out several pre-loaded magazines, then began slapping them inside the rifles.

"We can't use those! Those are *people* out there! We can't just blow them up because of some misunderstanding!" Kelly said.

Mulligan turned and looked at her directly. "Lieutenant, if we can walk in and negotiate with the people who are holding our crewmates and get out of there without firing a shot, fine—I'm all for it. But if we meet resistance, I intend to respond decisively."

Kelly glared at him. "What's the matter, Mulligan, wasn't the last war enough for you?"

"Back off, Jordello. He says he's got the skills for this stuff. Let him do what he has to do."

Mulligan looked past Kelly. Rachel stood right behind her, holding a heavy ballistic vest in one hand and a radio headset in the other. Her expression was hard, her attitude focused. It was obvious that she wasn't letting her dread over her husband and her hatred for Mulligan get the best of her anymore. She looked like a full-time player. Mulligan was caught completely off-guard by the unexpected alliance.

"Kelly, you and Rachel get suited up in combat armor," Laird said. "Sarmajor, I take it we're going to move fast and keep our exposure to the elements to a minimum?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Then let's skip the MOPP gear," Laird suggested, which surprised Mulligan almost as much as Rachel backing him up against Jordello. "The rad count's so low we won't need it, and it'll just slow us down."

"Hooah on that, sir," Mulligan said.

Kelly wasn't letting it go. "Jim, we can't just go to guns on the first group of survivors we've encountered in—"

"We're not," Laird said. He popped a magazine inside another rifle, pulled back on the charging lever, and checked to ensure the safety was set before setting it down and moving to the next rifle. "We're going in armed, and Mulligan has operational control of the mission, but no one's going to shoot first and ask questions later. Right, Mulligan?"

"Depending on the situation, yes," Mulligan said. He turned back to Kelly. "If we're attacked, we'll need to defend ourselves. We'll give them a chance, but if they fuck it up, we absolutely *will* light them up so we can continue with our mission—remember what we're here for, Lieutenant."

"Remember what Harmony Base stands for, Sergeant Major," she shot back.

Laird sighed. "Kelly, listen—"

"Pull your head out of your ass, Jordello!" Rachel said. "We let these people get the upper hand and detain us here, or outright kill us or whatever it is they might want to do, then *everyone* at Harmony winds up taking the long dirt nap. You need to choose between the survival of everyone you know or your ideals. Let us know when you've made your decision, all right?"

*Damn, that was impressive,* Mulligan thought.

Kelly glared at Rachel, then looked to Laird. The captain met her eyes for a moment, then shrugged. "Andrews and Mulligan are right, Kelly. Mission first, founding principles second. The situation's pretty clear, and I think we've taken this discussion as far as it can go. Get manned up. You too, Andrews. I know you're not military, and we'll do what we can to keep you out of it, but I'll walk you through operating an assault rifle. Just in case."

"Good," Rachel said.

"So that's it? Decision's made?" Kelly asked.

"It looks that way, ma'am," Mulligan said.

She turned away and pushed past Rachel without saying anything further. She reached into a locker and she pulled out another set of body armor.

Mulligan nodded to Rachel. "Thanks for the assist."

"Just do your job," Rachel said. "For once." She turned her back to him and began pulling on a pair of kneepads.

**A**NDREWS SAT ON the floor of a darkened room, trying not to think about the aches and pains that still sung across his body, courtesy of the beating he'd taken at the warehouse. He was angry at himself for allowing the attackers to take him down so easily. Even though he'd been alone, he had been armed with an assault rifle and had gone through a fairly intensive basic training regimen that Mulligan himself had presided over. Andrews had thought he was ready for all eventualities, including having to kill another person, only to find that he had hesitated in the final moment. The only way to have avoided capture would have been to flick the firing selector to auto and open up on anyone not from Harmony Base. But he hadn't, and now it was time to figure out just what the hell he was going to do.

"Coach ...? How you doing?"

Andrews looked up. Sitting across from him was Spencer, his face battered and bloodied. He cradled his right arm against his chest. His wrist and hand were severely swollen, and the distended flesh there was already turning a vibrant shade of purple. Like Andrews, he had been stripped of all his gear, save for his uniform. Spencer tried to smile, but the expression turned into a grimace when his split lip started to bleed again.

"Compared to you, I'm sitting pretty. How're you holding up, Spence?"

Spencer looked down at his arm. "You think this is broken?"

"Oh, yeah. Don't move it, just keep it right where it is."

Spencer nodded. "I gotta tell you, the pain's about to get me, sir."

Andrews reached out and patted one of Spencer's feet gently. "Hang in there, man."

Spencer nodded, but his eyes seemed unfocused. After a long moment, he said, "What do you think they did to Leona?"

Andrews clenched his teeth and looked away. He squeezed Spencer's foot. Both of them had heard Leona screaming, a bloodcurdling series of shrieks that rocked them to their very cores. Andrews had immediately gone to the room's locked door and pounded on it—attacked it, really, kicking it with all his strength—but it was a metal fire door and wouldn't budge. They could tell from the screams that Leona wasn't that far from them, but with the thick cinderblock walls and the locked metal door, she might as well have been a million miles away. Her screams had stopped after a brief time, and they'd heard nothing for over an hour since. The light coming in from the room's single window high on the wall above Andrews's head had already faded to a dull amber. The sun had set, and night was coming.

"I don't know, man. I don't know," he said finally.

Spencer nodded again. "She's a strong chick. For her to scream like that ... they must've been doing something horrible to her."

"Don't talk, Spence. Save your strength." He wanted to add a platitude like *We'll get out of this*, or *Don't worry, the others are on their way*, but even to his own ears they would sound false. He settled for patting Spencer's foot again, though he knew the gesture would do little to dispel the swarthy crew chief's fear. He knew what Spencer was thinking. Even though they were both concerned for Leona's well-being, they were also deeply frightened of what lay in store for them. Death? Torture? Andrews didn't know, but he knew he would find out eventually. He had already decided to plead with their captors to let Spencer go and keep only him.

Or kill him first, so he wouldn't have to listen to Spencer's screams in the growing darkness.

*But where's Mulligan? If they'd caught him, too, wouldn't he be here with us? Is he being held somewhere else? Or did he escape?*

The last thought was a source of strength. If Mulligan had in fact escaped, there was at least a chance they could be rescued. Andrews had no doubt that Mulligan was the cold, highly skilled special operator he was said to be. If he had managed to elude capture and if he could get to SCEV Five and contact Laird and the others, then the chances of getting out of this mess alive went up a notch.

*Unless he convinced the others to go for the supports and get the hell back to Harmony.*

That last thought didn't leave Andrews feeling warm and fuzzy. He and Spence had made a silent decision not to discuss Mulligan or his whereabouts—if he *had* escaped, there was no sense in giving their captors any intel on him. The possibility that he might have put mission success ahead of a rescue was something they didn't want to consider.

The sound of a metal bolt being drawn cracked through the darkness. Andrews rose immediately, facing the door as it slowly swung open. Spencer slowly clambered to his feet, cradling his injured arm; Andrews didn't move to help him. He wanted to be free and unencumbered in case he needed to fight.

Torchlight brightened the room. Two natty-looking men in threadbare clothing stepped inside. One held a torch in one hand and a spiked cudgel in the other. The second man held a machete, which looked like it had seen years of use. Both men were filthy, and their rank body odor filled the room quickly. Spencer muttered a curse and stepped away from them, grimacing. The two men were as thin as scarecrows, clearly malnourished, but Andrews didn't dare underestimate them. Though scrawny, they also appeared to be as tough as shoe leather—anyone who had survived in this dead city had to be.

A third man stepped into the room. His face was pockmarked and his clothing was old and worn, but he obviously tended to himself. His bearing told Andrews he was a man of some authority, such as it were. The bright gleam in his dark eyes conveyed to Andrews that he was as ruthless as any warlord who had ever lived. The man looked from Andrews to Spencer, then back again. He smiled broadly.

"Captain Michael Andrews? Commander of the Self-Contained Exploration Vehicle you've so graciously donated to us? The vehicle entry code is eight-nine-zero-two-four. It's powered by two Honeywell AGT2500 gas turbine engines and has an Arbalest millimeter wave radar system manufactured by Lockheed Martin—oddly

enough, I'm familiar with those. You come from Harmony Base, a subterranean complex located in what's left of Kansas, some fifty miles from the Colorado border. You're here to secure supports for your geothermal heat conversion units. If you fail, then about three hundred seventy-five people will die." The man's smile widened into a Cheshire Cat grin. "Feel free to correct me if I might have gotten something wrong."

"Where's the rest of my team?" Andrews asked.

"Lieutenant Eklund is being well taken care of, Captain. Don't worry—I know you must've have heard her screams, but she hasn't been permanently damaged. And your man Mulligan will be found any time now ... assuming he's still alive." The man's countenance darkened slightly. "He managed to kill several members of my family. He'll pay for that. All of you will."

Andrews heart leapt at the news. *Mulligan's still alive!*

The man smiled once again. "I wouldn't feel suddenly optimistic, Captain. He *will* be found. But listen, forgive the delay in our little meeting—I've been exploring the capabilities of your vehicle. Rather impressive collection of technology, isn't it? Sophisticated, but simple at the same time. Lieutenant Eklund has been *most* helpful in assisting me in understanding its more advanced operations. Allow me to introduce myself." The man actually *bowed*, as if Andrews was some sort of visiting dignitary being received by a civilized man in a civilized land. "I am the Law." He straightened and met Andrews's gaze with humorless eyes. "In both name and fact."

"Why did your people attack us?" Andrews asked.

"You invaded our territory. Perhaps you aren't aware, Andrews, but the world is a very hostile place these days." Law spoke almost conversationally. He looked down at his dark, long-sleeved shirt and brushed some dust from one of the lapels, as if Andrews was boring him.

"Granted, the world is absolutely a hostile place," Andrews said, and he heard the anger and frustration in his voice. "But now you *know* why we're here. Our mission has nothing to do with you. There's no reason for you to hold us—"

Law looked up and his eyes narrowed. The air seemed to crackle around Andrews, then a tremendous bolt of pain slashed through him, from head to groin. He cried out and doubled over, almost falling to his knees. He felt his bladder quiver and, for a moment, he thought he was going to piss himself. He'd never felt anything as intense as this in his entire life; it was like all his innards had suddenly burst into flame. His ragged cry dissolved into a series of hacking coughs as he gagged, his stomach turning. Then he did fall to his knees, and a moment later, his forehead met the floor as the pain increased.

"Don't lecture me, Andrews! This is *my* domain!" Law shouted. "I ask, and you answer! That's how it works!"

With that, the pain suddenly disappeared. Andrews caught himself before he collapsed, feeling a hot sweat break out across his body. His gut churned, but he managed to hold back his gorge as he gasped for air.

*My God, what just happened?*

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "Captain ... Mike, you okay?" Spencer asked. "What happened, man?"



Andrews slowly pushed himself to his haunches. He nodded at Spencer, then rose to his feet. Law looked at him, smiling haughtily.

"Just a little trick I picked up years ago, before the war," Law said. "Yeah. 'Before the war.' There's something we don't talk about much around here, but I'll take a moment to fill you in. Interested, or—?"

"Go ahead," Andrews said, not wanting to contemplate what the "or" might entail.

"I was no one. I was a Marine for three years, but I hated it—I hated the service, hated the lack of individuality, hated being a tiny cog in a huge machine. I was one of the Corps' problem children—they couldn't make me into what they wanted me to be, and I wasn't inclined to let them. It wasn't exactly a match made in heaven, but I intended to serve out my enlistment. No matter what, I simply wouldn't quit—much to the Corps' displeasure, of course." Law smiled again. "But, as things happen, I was scouted by another agency. The CIA. Heard of them?"

"Yes," Andrews said.

Law nodded. "Anyway, I became a guinea pig for a new program. With artificial hormones and nanotechnology and some rather unpleasant rounds of microsurgery, my new employers gave me talents and abilities no other man has ever had. I was designed to be multifaceted. To be whatever the situation demanded—spy, soldier, interrogator, you name it—but then the war came. And this little guinea piggy was left to fend for himself."

Law indicated the two stinking men standing behind him, who watched Andrews and Spencer with hard eyes.

"Now, I'm the king. *Their* king, for whom they would do anything."

"Law ..." Andrews paused, swallowed, and licked his lips. He found he barely had the courage to speak. Would he be subjected to another round of horrible, terrifying agony? He would do almost anything to avoid that. "Law, please. Listen to me. You know why we're here, right? You understand what our mission is—"

"Your mission?" Law shouted, and Andrews took an involuntary step backward. "You think I give a rat's ass about your *mission*, Captain? You and your people live below ground in a sterile, climate-controlled environment, watching old movies, listening to music, eating decent food, living the good life while the rest of the planet fucking *died*! All your people did was kick back for ten years, not even *bothering* to help out the rest of us. You're hypocrites!"

"That's not so." Andrews kept his voice calm and rational. "That's not what Harmony's about. Our core mission statement is—"

"'When the world ends, our mission begins.' Yeah, I heard that already. I noticed your vehicle is armed with missiles and machine guns, by the way. Coming to offer help from the barrel of a weapon? I mean, you've already killed four members of my family, so why stop there?"

"Our weapons are defensive only, and *your* people attacked *us*! No warning, no attempted contact, nothing—just an outright attack while we were looking for what we needed. If you're so frightened of us, all you had to do was keep your heads down. We would've been gone in less than two hours!" Andrews spread his hands. "That's the truth, Law. Leona must have told you that, and I'm telling it to you again. We're not

on a mission of conquest, we're here looking for what my people need in order to survive."

Law snorted, but he seemed suddenly calm. He regarded the two men before him for a long moment. "Yes, yes, you both sing the same song. But it doesn't matter, Andrews. It simply doesn't matter. I'm not willing to take the chance. I know that if you don't leave here, your people will die from a poisoned atmosphere. Kind of ironic that your impressive base actually becomes a mass grave, am I right?"

"Why? Why let that happen?" Andrews asked. "Harmony has everything you need. Food. Medicine. Building supplies. Technology. We can relocate you to another place and support you in recovery. Listen to me, Law—if we die, then you doom your own people. We're your best chance at regaining what you lost in the war!"

"So you'd have us trade in what little we have left for the promise of a better future? Are you actually telling me that the *government* is back, and now it wants to help?" Law chuckled throatily, and Andrews could see he was actually enjoying the exchange. "I'm sorry, Captain. Those of us who managed to survive could never trust you. And why should we?" He turned away and walked out the door. As he passed the two men standing guard, he said, "Take them to the Pit."

When he stepped out of the room, more filthy survivors rolled in after him, overwhelming Andrews and Spencer like a putrid tide.

THE CAVERNOUS ROOM must have once been an arena of some sort, Andrews thought—perhaps a hockey rink. From the light of dozens of flickering torches that surrounded the rink, he could see that where there should have been a sheet of ice, there was instead desiccated earth dotted with sharp metal stakes. The bleachers surrounding the pit were filled with scores of wildly screaming survivors, ranging from filthy, scrappy men and women to twisted monstrosities—those who had been born with severe physical deformities, likely courtesy of the radioactive aftermath of the Sixty Minute War. He didn't understand how they had survived for so long. There were over a hundred people present, and they cheered and howled like crazed animals as Andrews and Spencer were dragged and thrown into the pit. Spencer cursed as he landed on his injured arm while rolling out of the fall, and he wound up lying on his side, cradling his wounded limb. Andrews hurried over to him and pulled him to his feet as the crowd began to pelt them with all manner of debris.

"Come on, Spence! On your feet!"

Once Spencer managed to stand, Andrews dragged him to the center of the pit. He tried to shield Spencer from the pieces of wood and stone that were hurled at them; most missed by a wide margin, but occasionally one connected.

"Man, this rates a solid ten point five on the 'Holy Shit' meter," Spencer said. "What the hell are these fuckers going to do to us now?"

"Nothing good," Andrews said. As he looked around the pit, he knew what was likely to happen. This was in fact an arena, just not for the sport it had been built for. Andrews and Spencer were going to be the entertainment.

At the far end of the rink, he saw Law mount a gangway that led to a decaying broadcast booth. Behind him, Leona was dragged along by two burly men. Her hands were bound before her. She looked down at them, and her eyes met Andrews's. Her expression was one of utter terror, and Andrews knew she had good reason to be frightened. Back at Harmony, Leona was considered beautiful. Here, in this shattered city where people still lived but humanity was dead, she would be a prized asset, perfect breeding stock. She would be passed from man to man until she could no longer provide what they needed. After that? Andrews wasn't sure, but he had no doubt she might spend years wishing for death.

Law held up his hands, and the jeering assemblage fell into a sudden, respectful silence, watching him with a mixture of religious reverence and bloodthirsty anticipation.

"It's been almost two years since this facility was last used, when survivalists from the north threatened our sanctuary with their tainted ways. And now, these two will meet their end in exactly the same manner!"

The crowd exploded into a barrage of cheers. Andrews could barely hear Spencer over the raucous din.

"Did he just say something about survivors from the north?" Spencer shouted.

"Yeah—I guess we were right, the Northwest might not have been hit so hard," Andrews shouted back.

"A shame, man. I would've liked to have gone up there, maybe see some real pine trees and Mount Ranier, or something." Spencer ducked as a dusty brick flew past his head.

Law held up his hands, grinning like a madman. When the crowd quieted itself, he looked down at the two men.

"The rules are simple, gentlemen. You fight until you are killed. Then, your carcasses will be divided up amongst my Family. After all ... a nutritious meal *is* hard to come by these days." To the crowd, he said, "And now ... *it begins!*"

As the crowd erupted yet again, Law continued walking to the old broadcast booth. Leona was dragged along after him, and the small group stepped inside. Law took a seat before the booth's open window, sitting up there like a demented Roman emperor settling in to watch gladiator games.

"You know, now would be a great time for Mulligan and the others to roll in and save the day," Spencer said, fear evident in his voice.

"The only thing Mulligan's saved in his entire life is a bad attitude." Andrews turned in place as he scanned the cavernous room, hoping to get an idea of what was going to happen next.

Surprisingly, he *did* see what was going to happen next. A towering man leapt into the pit opposite them. He was even bigger than Mulligan, standing almost seven feet tall. He was extremely well-fed; his muscles rippled beneath scabbed, knobby skin, and just one of his thighs was almost as big as both of Andrews's. But all was not perfect; the man's right arm was a misshapen club of calloused flesh, and his left eye was missing, perhaps ripped out long ago in some past contest, leaving behind a scarred, empty socket. Completely bald, the huge warrior turned toward Andrews and Spencer and smiled hungrily, revealing rotting, black teeth.

"Missing an eye and a bum arm," Spencer said. "Maybe things are looking up. The guy's worse off than I am."

"Don't get too cocky, Sergeant," Andrews cautioned. "He's still going to be one tough customer. Keep to his left when you can, hang out in his blind spot."

"Hooah. What about you?"

"I don't have a busted arm. I'll try and tire him out, then we'll figure out how we're going to take him down."

If Spencer replied, Andrews didn't hear him. The crowd's cheering swelled, and the giant bellowed and charged before the two men had an opportunity to ready themselves for his attack. Andrews shoved Spencer aside and darted to his left, hoping to attract the giant's full attention before he zeroed in on Spencer, who would be the easier target. He needn't have worried; the giant was apparently looking for a fight, so he charged directly at Andrews, his club-arm held high, his mouth open wide as he released a guttural war cry. Andrews stopped short and waited for the disfigured warrior to close on him, his fists held out before him as he adopted a fighting stance.

That encouraged the brute, and he pounded toward him with reckless abandon, his big feet stomping into the dry, packed earth of the arena, bearing down on Andrews like an out-of-control freight train. At the last moment, when the warrior was nearly on top of him, Andrews fell to his hands and knees. Unable to stop, the warrior tripped over Andrews and slammed face-first into the dirt, sending up an explosion of dust. The impact was strong enough to knock the wind out of Andrews and he floundered about on his back, frantically trying to take a breath while attempting to gather his feet beneath him and press his advantage. He rolled over onto his belly and pushed himself to his knees, his movements slow—too slow. The giant was already recovering from his spill, and he awkwardly levered himself to his knees with his good arm. Andrews saw Spencer moving in, racing to tackle the brute before he could get to his feet.

“Spence, no!” Andrews croaked, but his warning was lost in the cacophony of the cheering crowd.

Spencer ran right into the warrior, slamming into him with his shoulder like a linebacker. He practically bounced off the larger man. The warrior howled and swung at him with his good arm. Spencer tried to duck under it, but the warrior was surprisingly fast. He took the swing right across the head, and the blow sent him sprawling across the arena’s dirt floor. The crowd exploded with thunderous applause. The warrior grinned and hauled himself to his feet, stepping toward Spencer.

Andrews leapt toward him and delivered a powerful snap-kick to the giant’s side, throwing as much of his body weight into the attack as he could. The warrior lurched sideways with a sharp grunt as Andrews’s boot made solid contact with his ribs. Nevertheless, the warrior spun with uncanny speed and struck Andrews in the chest with his clubbed arm. The force of the blow was incredible; Andrews was literally lifted from his feet and went flying through the air. He landed on the hard-packed arena floor and rolled right toward one of the sharp metal stakes. The sharpened metal sliced open his temple as his head bumped into it. Andrews cried out and pressed his hand to the wound. When he pulled it away to struggle back to his feet, his palm was slick with blood. The crowd went wild at the sight of his injury, and dozens of natty survivors jumped up and down in the bleachers, shrieking in delight.

The warrior turned back to Spencer as he charged back toward him. He grabbed the front of Spencer’s uniform in one big hand and swung him around like a rag doll. Spencer tried to twist away, but to no avail—the giant’s grip was too strong. With a roar, the warrior lifted him into the air and hurled him away, as if the crew chief was no more substantial than a newborn infant. Spencer tumbled as he arced toward the arena floor, coming down squarely on one of the twisted metal stakes. The stake’s sharp tip erupted through his chest. Spencer shuddered, then tried to get up. Dark blood spread across his uniform blouse. Heart blood, Andrews knew.

*Oh my God.*

Satisfied that Spencer was no longer a threat, the warrior pivoted and charged toward Andrews. Andrews grabbed a handful of dirt as he rose to his feet and hurled it into the giant’s face. The warrior recoiled, rubbing at his eye with his hand while blindly lashing out with his clubbed arm. Andrews ducked under the first few swipes, then kicked the man-thing right in the groin. The warrior screamed and doubled over,

sinking to his knees. Andrews stepped in and caught him with a fast uppercut that landed with such authority that the giant's jaws slammed shut. Andrews pressed his advantage, punching the giant in the face again and again, ignoring the pain that blossomed in his hands. The crowd booed, furious that their champion was taking a beating so soon after downing one opponent. The warrior's head rocked back and forth from the fury of Andrews's blows, until it finally toppled over onto its back, bleeding profusely from a shattered nose. With a gurgle, it spat out bloody saliva and pieces of broken teeth. Andrews reared back and brought up his right foot, intending to stomp on the giant's face, but a hurled brick struck him in the back of his right shoulder. He went down with a cry, stumbling across the giant's body. Feeling the shift in the tide, the giant lashed out with his legs. One of his huge feet caught Andrews under the right arm, and he was sent rolling across the arena floor. He came to a rest next to Spencer's spasming body. Andrews pushed himself to his elbows and, for a brief instant, his eyes met Spencer's. Despite the bloodied stake piercing his chest, the crew chief was trying to sit up, to get back into the fight. The light was fading from Spencer's face.

"I'm okay," Spencer said, smiling. Blood bubbled from his mouth and nostrils, and then he died.

Andrews heard the giant warrior grunt as he pushed himself to his feet. He looked at Spencer's body as it slowly relaxed, settling back onto the stake that had claimed his life. The crowd roared its approval, and Andrews knew the warrior must have been making his way back to him. Andrews felt a fire begin to burn in his chest, and he shoved himself upright, leaping to his feet. Hot rage fueled him, and he whirled to face the oncoming giant, ignoring the throb in his shoulder where the brick had struck him. He was surprised to find the warrior's approach was slow and measured—no more charging, no more howling. Andrews had put a hurting on him, and he knew the warrior, despite his greater size and strength, was going to take his time. He had learned that Andrews was no pushover.

That suited Andrews fine. He was going to make the warrior suffer every moment until one of them was dead.

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The tremendous din of the roaring crowd led Mulligan and the others to the arena like sharks following a trail of blood. The array of torches that illuminated the great ring caused their night vision goggles to wash out, so Mulligan whispered into his headset and ordered everyone to remove them. They had more than enough light to operate by, and with the vast majority of the opposing force focused on Andrews, the group could move with unexpected freedom.

He and Choi planted their charges on two stout I-beams that the big sergeant major judged were primary load-bearing components for the civic center. While eight pounds of C4 might not be enough to bring the house down under normal circumstances, it was his hope that the accumulated stress of surviving a nuclear attack, earthquakes, and changing weather might have weakened the structure enough so the blast would cause at least a partial collapse. As they made their way

back to where Laird and Kelly waited with Rachel, Choi motioned to the arena, where Andrews and the impressively huge warrior continued their battle. Spencer lay motionless near the arena's center, surrounded by a pool of dark blood.

"Hey, shouldn't we do something about that?" Choi asked, not even bothering to keep his voice low due to the volume of the crowd.

Before Mulligan could respond, a filthy young man hurried out of a dark corridor, carrying a torch. His hair was long and matted, forming a natural set of grubby dreadlocks that hung down over his sallow face. The man stopped when he saw Mulligan and Choi crouching down only a few feet away. His mouth dropped open, and for a moment he gawked at them. Then he spun around and made to run back the way he had come. He didn't make it. Mulligan reacted instantly, grabbing a handful of his dirty, oversized shirt and yanking him off his feet. The man dropped his torch and struggled; his shout was cut short by Mulligan's knife sliding into the back of his neck. The man kicked once, then went limp. The odor of urine made Mulligan's nostrils twitch, and he dragged the body to an abandoned refreshment stand. He hurled the corpse behind the concession counter.

"Damn, man! I thought we were going to give these people a chance!" Choi said, his eyes wide with shock.

Mulligan pointed to the arena, where Andrews and the big warrior were circling each other while the riotous crowd hurled all manner of debris at Andrews. "Yeah, like they did with Spencer? That plan's off the table. Use your head, boy!"

Choi considered that, then nodded. "Roger that, Sergeant Major."

Mulligan spoke into his tactical headset as he hurried down the corridor that ringed the arena. "Laird, this is Mulligan. Over."

"Go ahead, Mulligan. Over."

"Charges planted, and we just had to service one target. We're heading back to you now. Get ready to move out when we arrive. Party in thirty. Over."

"Good copy."

Mulligan abandoned stealth for speed and set an aggressive pace. They were living on borrowed time—even though there were no signs of firearms among any of the survivors, he knew that at least four assault rifles were somewhere in their possession, along with a multitude of bladed weapons that could be just as deadly if wielded by experienced hands. Though he would have liked nothing better, Mulligan's goal was not to get into a protracted fight—they had a greater mission to accomplish, and that meant the team from Harmony Base had to avoid becoming decisively engaged.

When he and Choi linked up with Laird and the others, he found they were still crouching in the darkened hallway that fed into the main corridor surrounding the arena. Laird was oriented toward the bleachers, M416A3 assault rifle at the ready; it was outfitted with an M320A1 forty-millimeter grenade launcher under the barrel, a double-action device equipped with its own pistol grip that allowed for more precise fire. Kelly Jordello's assault rifle was in a similar configuration, and she covered the rear of the hallway. Rachel Andrews had a vanilla assault rifle with no additional modifications, as Mulligan hadn't had the time to school her in the grenade launcher's use. She was in the center of the formation, and when Mulligan saw her staring at her

husband fighting for his life down below, he wondered if he hadn't made a tactical error by not leaving her in the SCEV.

Mulligan motioned for Choi to stand guard while he squatted down beside Laird. "All right, it looks like Spencer's down, and Eklund's in that booth about fifty meters downrange. I want to go for her first, because I'm pretty sure things will get loud when we do, and that should pull some of the heat off Andrews. What do you think, sir?"

"Agreed," Laird said immediately. Either he had already formed the tactical picture by himself, or he was willing to do anything Mulligan suggested, as he was the expert. Mulligan didn't care which; he was just glad they weren't going to get into another debate.

"We have to help Mike!" Rachel hissed.

Mulligan fixed her with a seething glare. "We will. You stay here and hold this hallway, because we'll need it for our retreat. Are you ready to pull the trigger and ice some of these stinking fuckers, Andrews?"

She nodded immediately, with no hesitation. Mulligan liked that, but he had to be sure she was ready.

"They will likely come this way, or come up from behind you. You'll be on your own, and you might have to kill women and children. I'm going to guess that when you open up, they'll fade and try to get away from you. But you'll probably have to kill some of them. Are you *sure* you're ready for that?"

"Yes. I'll kill anyone I have to, Sergeant Major," Rachel said, her voice strong.

Mulligan pointed at her rifle. "Safety off, keep the weapon indexed until you have to shoot like I showed you. When it becomes necessary, put your booger hook on the bang lever and squeeze it. Shoot for the center mass, and do *not* hesitate—taking a second to think will only get you killed, and that just makes things harder for everyone."

"Yeah, getting killed would be a matter of importance to me too, Mulligan. Anything else?"

*Have to admire the can-do attitude on this one.* "Negative. Good luck, and if things turn south, contact us over the radio." He turned to the others. "Follow me. Remember your tactical spacing, and let's move fast."

He rose and started down the main corridor at a good clip, his rifle shouldered and held at the ready. Choi followed, then Laird, with Kelly bringing up the rear. They adopted a staggered formation, two hugging the right side of the corridor, two staying to the left. They moved at a jog and Mulligan dreaded every step, wondering if he was going crazy trying to pull off a rescue like this when the stakes were so high. He knew he had no choice, though. Even if the others could be convinced to cut their losses and resume the mission, Rachel Andrews would flat out reject the notion of not attempting to rescue her husband. And she had leverage—she was the one who had to decide which core supports were good enough to take back to Harmony. Returning with items that were damaged or the wrong size wouldn't help anyone back at the base.

They made it to the broadcasting booth's door without incident. Surprisingly, it was unguarded, even though Mulligan thought they must have known he had escaped. Had they thought he would just flee into the wasteland? That was a tragic



miscalculation on the part of the city survivors, but he doubted they had to deal with incursions into their territory very often. Fine by him—their ignorance made his life easier.

Mulligan motioned Choi forward. “You get the door. Laird, you’re in with me. Orient right when we go in, I’ll go left. Jordello, rear guard. Everyone set?”

“Hooah,” Choi said.

“Good to go here,” Laird responded.

“Roger,” Kelly said.

“Do it, Choi.”

Choi reached for the door and turned the knob. Nothing happened. He tried again, turning it the other way. It wouldn’t budge. He turned back to Mulligan.

“It’s locked, Sarmajor. How do you want to play it now?”

“Get the fuck out of the way,” Mulligan snapped. Choi obediently stepped aside, and Mulligan walked up to the door and kicked it with all his might. And this time, damn if the door didn’t truly snap right off its hinges.

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Leona was seated right next to Law, staring down at the pit below. Andrews and the hulking warrior clashed, kicking, punching, and charging. It was obvious the giant had strength on his side, but Andrews had skill and maneuverability. He was able to wind his way through the field of stakes sticking up from the arena floor with greater agility than the warrior, and he would close, strike, and retreat before the warrior could respond. And the giant warrior was tiring. His huge torso was slick with a sheen of sweat that gleamed in the torchlight, and even from her distant vantage point, she could see the warrior’s chest heaving as he pulled in great breaths. Beside her, Law fidgeted and muttered, clearly agitated as he remained fixated on the fight. He had been initially elated when Spencer had gone down, an action that had brought Leona to her feet with a shocked cry. Law had laughed at her, reveling in her distress as one of her foul-smelling guards forced her back into her chair. He groped one of her breasts at the same time, gripping her painfully. She tried to shrug him off, and that made Law laugh even more.

But now, the gigantic warrior’s assured win was no longer quite as certain. Leona could see that the deformed giant didn’t have the same endurance as Andrews. He had probably never fought a well-nourished combatant before, much less one that had been formally trained in both down and dirty hand-to-hand combat as well as some of the more refined martial arts. Not that Andrews was in the best of shape, himself. He had clearly been beaten during his abduction, and he’d already suffered at the hands of his opponent; the cut on his temple was still bleeding, and a trail of blood had dripped across the front of his uniform. The giant was slowly herding him out of the center of the arena, which meant he would be at some peril from the crowd, who continued to try to pelt him with all manner of debris. But the tide of the battle had changed, and Law had become sullen and impetuous. Leona enjoyed his discomfort immeasurably.

Then the door behind her exploded inward.

Law was out of his seat in an instant. He charged through a side door as small arms fire filled the broadcast booth. The filthy degenerate who had groped her went down like a sack of potatoes from a single bullet to the head. Leona threw herself out of her chair, coming to rest on the cold concrete floor next to the man's still body. Two more shots rang out, and the second man guarding her crumpled. From her vantage point on the floor, Leona could see his right foot twitch erratically for a moment before a deep stillness settled over him. She realized she had just watched two men die—and she couldn't have felt happier.

A moment later, she was roughly hauled to her feet. "Eklund, you all right?" Sergeant Major Scott Mulligan asked as he produced a knife and sawed through the rough twine that bound her wrists together.

"The one that got away ... he's psionic!"

"Yeah, okay, whatever," Mulligan said, and to Leona it appeared he had just decided she'd lost a ton of marbles.

She struggled to discover some frame of reference that Mulligan could understand. "Listen to me! He has mental abilities—he can cause you to feel pain just by *looking* at you! And he's absolutely insane, he thinks we're some kind of war party!"

"Good to know," Mulligan said. "Thanks for the hot tip." With that, he grabbed her by the wrist and hauled her toward the exit. Jim Laird fell in behind her, and from outside the booth, Leona heard a raging furor begin to build.

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The gunfire sent a wave of shock through the entire crowd, and for a long moment, they seemed to forget all about their champion and his struggle with Andrews. The warrior himself turned in the direction of the shots, which came from somewhere behind him. Andrews looked past the giant's shoulder, and he saw commotion in the broadcast booth. Law bolted out of the cubicle through a side door and ran down a corridor without looking back, his arms and legs pumping. Through the booth's window, he saw someone haul Leona to her feet. It was Mulligan, and beside him, Laird stepped toward the opening and lifted his rifle to his shoulder, ready to fire on anyone or anything that might turn into a threat.

*Dude ... get this over with!*

Andrews grabbed a nearby metal stake and pulled with all of his strength. Only its point had been sharpened, so he was in little danger of slicing open his palms and fingers, but the picket was stuck deep into the earth. He was elated to feel it give, bit by bit, until he had pulled almost three feet of rusted metal out of the dry earth. Holding the implement like a pike, he charged toward the warrior just as he started to turn back to him. He rammed the stake through the giant's neck, feeling the rusted metal grate against cervical vertebrae as it passed through soft tissue and tougher tendon. The giant shuddered with a gurgling cry as blood fanned into the air from a severed artery. He tried to fling Andrews off, squirming and thrashing like a wounded beast. Andrews hung on, pushing the stake even further into its neck. A gout of blood spurted across his hands and arms. The gigantic warrior shuddered once again and fell to his knees with a choking shriek. Andrews wrenched the stake from side to side,

causing as much damage as he could. The warrior silently fell face-first to the arena floor, his limbs twitching as life fled his body. Andrews stood over the fallen brute and stomped on his head, again and again, throwing as much strength into each strike as he could. When the giant finally stopped moving and a pool of blood began to spread beneath his shattered skull, Andrews got control over the seething rage that filled him.

*Spencer...*

Several survivors leaped into the pit as Andrews moved to Spencer's side. He grabbed Spencer's wrist, seeking a pulse; finding none, he pressed his fingers against Spencer's jugular. He couldn't feel any trace of movement, and he looked down at Spencer's face. In death, the crew chief's expression was slack, as if dismayed by his demise.

Automatic gunfire ripped through the advancing survivors, dropping two of them. The rest shrieked and fled, forgetting all about Andrews as more bullets slapped at their heels. Several more stumbled and fell to the ground, writhing in agony from leg wounds. Andrews looked to his left and saw Rachel standing in the bleachers, a smoking assault rifle against her shoulder. The survivors nearest her shoved and jostled each other as they struggled to flee from the madwoman with the rifle. Rachel ignored them and leapt into the pit. Picking her way around the stakes, she raced over to Andrews and threw her arms around him.

"Thank God," she whispered into his ear. "Thank God, thank God ..."

Andrews hugged her back. "Good to see you again, babe."

Mulligan loped up a moment later. He spared Spencer's body a quick glance, then pulled Andrews and Rachel apart. "Listen, this is touching and all that, but you'd better move your butts before you wind up giving the rest of us the celestial eyeball!"

He pushed them toward the side of the arena, where Laird waited, clutching his assault rifle nervously. He helped them climb into the bleachers while Mulligan stood guard behind them. As Andrews clambered up the side of the rink, he noticed a small group of people sticking to the shadows across the pit from them. They did not flee.

"Mulligan, see those guys across the arena?"

"Got them, Captain. So long as they stay there, I'll let them live." When the Andrewses were clear, Mulligan turned and pulled himself onto the bleachers. Once he had joined them, he grabbed Rachel's arm. "You were supposed to hold the hallway for us!"

"I decided to save my husband, instead. Have a problem with that, asshole?" Rachel shot back.

"Save this for later," Andrews snapped. He took the assault rifle from Rachel and looked at Mulligan and Laird. "We need to get the hell out of here."

"We sure do," Mulligan said. "We wired this place with demolitions—the sooner we can clear it, the sooner I can set off the charges and add some more confusion to the mix. We don't want to be around here when that happens."

"My thoughts exactly," Laird said. "Let's go!" He led the group back to the hallway, which was secured by Kelly and Leona. Down the corridor, several figures loomed in the flickering shadows cast by the torchlight. Andrews slowed when he noticed them, but Mulligan pushed him roughly from behind.

"Go on, I've got them!" the NCO snapped. "Laird, get them moving. Go for Four, it's closer. I'll hold these fuckers back for a bit, then I'll catch up with you. If I don't show in ten minutes, resume the mission!"

Laird looked back at Mulligan with narrowed eyes. "You're saying we should *leave* you, Sarmajor?"

"I'm saying you should finish what we started."

"We'll hold station for you as long as we can, Mulligan," Andrews said. "Don't screw around, just buy us enough time to get to the rigs."

"You can count on that, Captain." Mulligan raised his rifle to his shoulder. "Now shake a leg!"

Andrews nodded, and he pushed Rachel ahead of him as he and the rest followed Laird into the inky darkness of the hallway.

"Mike, here," Kelly said as she fell in behind him. She handed him a pair of night vision goggles, which he immediately powered up and slipped on over his head. He adjusted the monocular slightly, then shot her a quick thumbs-up. He could see perfectly, thanks to the light-intensifying technology of the NVGs. From behind them, Mulligan's assault rifle cracked out three rapid shots. Andrews didn't look back. The hulking senior NCO had their back, and he could take care of himself.

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Mulligan watched as the group of survivors at the end of the corridor slowly picked their way toward him. He wasn't concerned about them just yet, since they were still a good distance away, but he had to question their intelligence. Who tried to sneak up on a guy holding an assault rifle, especially when their concealment was virtually nonexistent? He decided to illustrate their folly by firing three shots at the individual in the lead—two more than absolutely necessary, but he wanted to send a strong message that couldn't be misinterpreted. He was rewarded by two of the survivors going down. One of them lay still; the second one, who had been behind the first, writhed and screamed in agony on the floor.

"That'll learn ya," he said to himself as he reached into a cargo pocket on his uniform trousers. He pulled out the remote detonator that would trigger the charges at the other side of the arena and armed the device with a flick of his thumb. All he had to do now was press the trigger, and—

He lurched as something struck his M416, sending pieces of metal flying through the air. A second object slapped him in the chest an instant later, and yet another exploded against the concrete wall beside his head, pelting him with small pieces of shrapnel that cut open his face. He heard three reports from a firearm, then a fourth. Something went *snap!* as it blasted right past his head. Mulligan stumbled away and fell to his knees, thankful for the kneepads he wore. At his age, busting a kneecap would be bad news, though not as bad as being shot. He rolled away from the wall—and the hallway—and brought his rifle around. Sure enough, another group of survivors was closing in on him from the opposite side of the corridor, and one of them held a captured M416A3. Mulligan made to shoot the rifleman, but his own rifle was inoperative; he was disgusted to find that a chunk of the upper receiver had been

damaged, right where the bolt carrier group was located. The result was that his assault rifle had been converted into a rather expensive club.

*Motherfuck!*

The makeshift rifleman opened fire again as he quickly advanced, grinning as he squeezed off round after round. The man had Mulligan dead to rights, and the only thing that saved Mulligan from being killed was the man's decision to fire while moving. As such, his aim was atrocious, and bullets pocked the concrete floor all around Mulligan as he frantically backpedaled. At the same time, he was being driven away from his escape route.

With no other choice available to him, he pressed the trigger on the detonator he still had in his right hand. He was rewarded with a tremendous thunderclap that seemed to blossom into existence right behind him; a heartbeat later, whirling shrapnel flew through the air as several torches were extinguished by the ensuing shockwave. He watched as several pieces of lethal debris slashed through the group of survivors. The gunman trying to kill Mulligan was almost beheaded by a spinning piece of metal that ricocheted off the corridor's concrete wall and buried itself in his neck. Plunged into inky darkness, Mulligan heard the creaks and groans of overstressed superstructure fill the air, loud enough for his ringing ears to register. The charges he and Choi had placed had done their job. The roof of the civic center was giving way, slowly collapsing. Great pieces of metal and thick, twisted girders fell behind him, striking the floor and the bleachers with thunderous impacts that kicked up a huge cloud of dust. Mulligan snapped his NVGs over his eyes and struggled to his feet, bolting for the hallway, weaving his way past falling debris. He had almost made it when something large and heavy struck him in the head, driving him to the floor and knocking the NVGs off his face.

Blackness engulfed him.

**M**UTED SOUNDS OF thunder caught up to the SCEV crew as they sprinted down the dark hallway, preceding the surprisingly strong shockwave that tore at them an instant later, carrying with it a great cloud of dust. Andrews grabbed Rachel's arm, supporting her as she stumbled and gasped in shock at the sudden rumble of the explosions. But the cacophony didn't abate; it intensified, and Andrews felt the floor tremble beneath his feet.

"Keep moving!" he shouted, his voice barely audible above the raging din. "Don't stop, the place is imploding!" But the light was failing, leaving the hallway in absolute darkness; their night vision goggles had nothing left to intensify. He was rewarded with vision a moment later as Laird switched on a flashlight, its harsh LED glow so powerful through the goggles that had it not been for the thick dust flooding into the passage, it might have overwhelmed the NVGs entirely.

"Follow me!" Laird shouted, as fragments of concrete began to fall from the ceiling. "Hurry, hurry!"

The team followed Laird as he set off down the hallway, wading through dust that only grew thicker with each passing second. The darkened passageway trembled and shook as the structure behind them collapsed upon itself. Andrews wondered about Mulligan's fate. He heard Laird trying to raise the sergeant major over the radio, but there was no response.

Finally, they left the choking clouds of dust behind, though the occasional sound of falling rubble followed them, echoing down the hallway. Andrews sneezed, his nostrils clogged with filth—he could taste it in the back of his mouth. Laird turned right and descended a wide flight of steps.

"This way," he said, voice pitched low.

"Where are we headed?" Andrews asked.

"There's a train station down below. It's open to the street, thanks to an earthquake or something. We can get out through there and go back to Five."

"What about Four?" Andrews asked.

"It's here, in a parking garage. It's a closer reach, but the thing is, the parking garage is locked by a big steel gate."

Andrews considered that. "Can we blast through it?"

"What, you mean with a missile?" Each SCEV was armed with AGM-114R Hellfire missiles that were packed with two hundred pounds of high-explosive. Originally intended as anti-tank weapons, chances were high that they would make quick work of the garage door. Laird nodded. "Oh, hell yeah."

"Let's go there, then," Andrews said. "We can't be leaving one of the rigs here, not if there's a chance we can get it out."

Laird hesitated, then nodded. "All right. We'll need to pull around the block to get my rig, though."

"Not a problem," Andrews said. "We're not going to leave any equipment behind if we can avoid it."

They descended down the next flight of stairs, moving as quickly as they could.

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The garage was two floors below the arena level, and it looked mostly undamaged. With high ceilings and several different entrances—all of them closed by sliding moat doors, Andrews noticed—it was obvious this level of the parking structure had been intended for freight to be moved in and out. The carcasses of scavenged cars and big tractor trailer rigs lay about, stripped of anything useful. It was pitch-black inside, so Laird left his flashlight on, providing more than enough light for the team to see by with their night vision goggles. As they picked their way through the garage, Andrews saw SCEV Four sitting in a clear area on the far side of the parking structure. The rig was hooked up to a stout-looking tow motor by thick, rusted chains. He wondered how long it would take to free it.

"Looks pretty quiet here," Choi said, holding his assault rifle ready just in case. Even though he kept his voice pitched low, it still resounded with sibilant echoes inside the parking garage. Andrews motioned for him to be silent, then pointed at the rig, ensuring everyone saw the motion. He took the lead, jogging through the gloom toward the waiting SCEV.

Just as the group closed on the rig, Andrews heard a flurry of movement off to his right. Choi shouted a warning as a metal spear sailed through the air. It flew benignly past Andrews and struck Leona in the right thigh. She went down with a startled yelp, and the spear made a metallic clink as it struck the cement floor beside her. Choi fired at a car, cracking off five rounds in rapid succession. Through the NVGs, Andrews saw sparks fly as the bullets tore through sheet metal. Figures crouching behind the vehicle shrank back, fading into the gloom as they scurried between the rotting husks of long-abandoned semi-trucks.

"I've got her!" Laird said, stopping Andrews as he reached down for Leona. "You go get the rig open!" Behind them, Kelly fired a burst on full automatic at another motley group of survivors as they charged toward the SCEV crew. They fled beneath the gunfire, though none of them fell. Andrews was about to snap at her to stop wasting ammunition, then thought better of it. A few bursts of full automatic gunfire was a good deterrent to keep the goblins at bay.

Then more shapes loomed around the SCEV. A *lot* more.

"Oh, *fuck*," he said.

"What is it?" Rachel asked.

Andrews didn't answer. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down behind a nearby car that had been so severely stripped that it provided a questionable amount of cover. More gunfire sounded behind them. Laird appeared, half-carrying Leona. The spear was gone, but she had a hand clamped over the wound in her thigh, and her face was set in a rictus of agony beneath her night vision goggles.

"Problem?" Laird asked.

"Dude, we've got a substantial blocking force between us and the rig—yeah, that's a problem," Andrews said.

"You're kidding!" Laird looked over the car and saw the group arrayed in front of the SCEV. They maintained a degree of tactical spacing, which meant they had had some training. Andrews peered around the car's dilapidated bumper, and he saw several members of the group break off. They were going to try to flank them.

"Okay, let's fall back and try to get to Five," he said. "I don't want to get into a stand-up fight with these numbers."

"Damn straight," Laird snapped, frustration and stress evident in his voice. He had good reason to be short. Leona was wounded, and she would slow them down. "We'll have to get upstairs to the train station and crawl up through the debris field. We'll need to find someplace where we can get Eklund squared away first, though."

Andrews started to answer, but something whacked off the side of the car in a blurring flash. He had the distinct impression it was an arrow. A moment later, something flared out in the garage, and a small boy ran toward them with a bottle in one hand. A flaming rag stuck out of the bottle's neck. Andrews raised his rifle, but it was too late—the boy hurled the bottle at them and sped toward a car, vaulting across its empty engine compartment and disappearing behind its bulk before Andrews could establish a lane of fire. The bottle tumbled toward them, and he pushed Rachel aside as it shattered against the ground at their feet, erupting in a ball of flame that washed out the NVGs, causing them to whiteout from the overload.

Two dozen people emerged from the darkness, screaming war cries as they charged forward, holding spears, machetes, bows and arrows—and captured assault rifles.

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Pushing his way upward, Mulligan eased his way out of the rubble that threatened to crush him. It took some doing, and clawing through the debris in pitch-black darkness didn't make things any easier. He knew he was severely scraped up; how many diseases was he exposing himself to? How much bacteria had gotten into his blood stream? As he dug his way out of the wreckage, he found he was laughing at himself. Of all the things to worry about now ...

His right hand found a void. He carefully pushed his way toward it, slipping beneath the twisted remnants of an I-beam, practically swimming in a sea of shattered concrete. His left shoulder met a piece of piping, and his progress was stalled until he could squeeze past it. He had to move slowly. The last thing he wanted was to cause the wreckage surrounding him to settle further and leave him forever entombed in San Jose.

Finally, he pushed into the void and found it was actually a way out of the rubble. Cool night air whispered across his sweaty, battered body as he clambered out of the twisted mess of metal, plastic, concrete, insulation, and wiring. Once he had fully extricated himself, he collapsed on top of the debris field, gasping for air. He hurt everywhere, so he just lay there, getting used to the pain. His eyes had adjusted to



the darkness, and he saw more than half of the roof had caved in, leaving some stray supports remaining; they held up nothing but empty air. Night sky loomed high overhead, full of faintly twinkling stars. From somewhere beneath the wreckage on the other side of the arena, he heard other people moving through the debris with painful grunts and whines. They weren't his people, so he wasn't going to investigate. Slowly, he sat up on the hard rubble and checked himself for any serious injuries. He was phenomenally lucky—only scrapes and some small cuts. They were painful, but not life-threatening. The thick body armor and elbow and knee pads he wore had likely saved him from greater injury, for which he was deeply thankful. More troubling was the fact he had lost most of his gear. His rifle was gone, his night vision goggles were smashed, and his radio headset was missing, probably somewhere in the rubble. He was happy to discover he still had his knife and flashlight.

*More than enough ...*

In the distance, he heard gunfire—lots of it. He sat motionless for a long moment, listening to the sounds of combat. It definitely wasn't coming from outside, which meant the team from Harmony Base was trapped somewhere inside the building.

Mulligan slowly clambered to his feet. He pulled a long length of steel piping from the wreckage and, using it as a walking stick, slowly began picking his way across the field of rubble.

**T**HE BATTLE IN the parking garage was hardly a one-sided affair.

Andrews was surprised by the ferocity shown by the survivors of the San Jose attack. Even though they were outgunned—mostly—they continued to attack the team from Harmony Base from all sides. They weren't terribly dumb about it, either. They would show themselves, feint a charge, then retreat as Andrews and the others opened fire. Then another attack would roll up on them from a different direction, forcing the SCEV team to divide their fire. The attackers moved like wraiths, fading in and out of the darkness so quickly that it was hard to get a bead on them, flitting from decrepit vehicle to support pillar and back again. The Molotov cocktails they occasionally hurled weren't particularly effective—Andrews and Laird kept the others moving so they wouldn't get fixed in place where they could be easily firebombed—but the weapons had an unexpected side effect. They caused the NVGs to overload occasionally, which deprived the team of their primary tactical superiority—night vision.

Then there were the two survivors with the captured rifles.

"Jesus, just how many of these guys are there?" Choi shouted as he reloaded. They were going through their ammunition much faster than planned. Even though Mulligan had instructed them to take as many magazines as they could carry, they had only a finite amount of munitions.

"A lot more than we'd thought," Andrews replied. He saw furtive movement in the darkness and raised his rifle, but he did not fire. Instead, he looked from side to side, keeping his weapon oriented on the original target, and he saw a group of four individuals running toward his position. They held axes and spears. Andrews turned to engage them and, as he did, one of the survivors with an assault rifle let loose a burst on his position. The gunman's aim was poor, and the bullets hit the car Andrews and Choi were crouching behind, but they slashed through the thin sheet metal. Choi recoiled, cringing.

Andrews kept his cool and squeezed off four shots at the group, which continued to advance. One went down, then another. The remaining pair split up and ran into the darkness, but Andrews followed one and fired two shots at the figure just as it slowed to hide behind one of the reinforced concrete support pillars. The body jerked as the 5.56-millimeter rounds passed through it before it slowly wilted to the floor.

"Choi, get on your weapon," Andrews ordered. "I want you to engage that shooter and take him out."

"Where is he?" Choi finished reloading his weapon, hit the bolt release, and brought it to his shoulder.

"Behind that truck over there, about seventy meters to your right. See it?"

"Roger, but can't see him!"

"Target the truck. Laird!"

"Go ahead!"

"Put a forty into that truck—the one Choi is targeting!"

"Got it!" Laird turned from his position with Kelly and raised his rifle. He put his hand on the M320's pistol grip and prepared to fire the forty-millimeter grenade downrange as Kelly sniped at another group of attackers. An arrow slashed right past Andrews's head.

Laird fired, the grenade launcher under his rifle ejecting its high explosive payload with a hollow puffing sound. A moment later, the truck was torn apart by a bright, sparking explosion that sent shrapnel whirling. The people hiding behind the truck fled in two separate directions.

"You want the guy with the rifle," Andrews reminded Choi.

Choi started firing immediately at the group peeling away to the right. *Crack-crack-crack-crack!* Andrews sighted on the group to the left and fired single shots, aiming carefully. Two combatants fell to the floor while the rest scattered, taking cover behind another truck.

"Got him!" Choi crowed. "*I got you, you stupid fuck!*" he shouted into the darkness. At the same time, something flashed to the right, immediately followed by another report. Choi grunted as he shifted sideways. Andrews spun and ripped off a burst on full automatic. Another shooter was out there, and he tried to fix him or her in place with full-auto fire. It didn't work; the assailant scuttled behind a distant row of dusty, cannibalized cars.

"Tony?" Andrews kept his sights on the cars, waiting for the shooter to reappear.

"I'm good—the armor took it," Choi said. A moment later: "Oh, *shit!*"

"What is it?"

"The shooter I dropped—I was distracted, and someone else just picked up the weapon!"

*We have to get out of here, Andrews thought. And we need to do it now.*

"Kelly! Come forward with Choi!" Andrews put his hand on Rachel's shoulder as she crouched between him and Choi, keeping her head down. She was the only one who was unarmed. When Kelly joined them, Andrews waved her into his position, then scurried to where Laird had set up behind a thick support column. Leona was lying behind a nearby car, working on her leg with a medical kit. Like Rachel, she had no weapon, but she did her best to keep an eye out for any incoming bandits.

"Jim, we have to get to Five," Andrews said. "These fuckers are going to fix us in place, and then just wait until we use up our ammo. We can't get into Four, and we can't stay here. We need to get to Five."

"I'm behind you on that, but it's going to be one tough fight," Laird said.

"How many forties did you guys bring with you?"

"All of them, the full twenty-four in the ordnance locker." Laird paused to fire at shapes moving in the gloom. "But we lost Mulligan's, so that leaves us with seventeen now. You're right, we should start going through them and tear these bastards up."

"Negative, that's not what I was getting at. Law's people have been coming down on us hard, but so far, they haven't been able to circle around behind us—and that's

where the garage entrance is. Any chance we can use the M320s to blast through the door?"

Laird's face lit up. "Jesus H. Christ, maybe so! Damn, why didn't I think of that?"

"I'll need you to take Kelly, Rachel, and Leona with you. You and Kelly can use your grenade launchers to try and blast a hole big enough for us to slip outside. Choi and I will hold them back. I'll need your spare magazines. We're going to have to pour it on big time to make them keep their heads down."

Laird frowned. "I don't think it'll take that many shots to open up the door. One of us should be able to do it, and I can move faster on my own—"

"Lee's wounded and Rachel's essential personnel," Andrews said. "We can't care for them this close to the enemy, and they'll slow our fallback. Much better if you and Kelly take them with you—you'll be able to protect them as well as open up our line of retreat. And if worse comes to worst and things get too hot, you can take them to the SCEV."

Laird didn't seem to like that, but he didn't say anything as he and Andrews continued to scan the darkness through their NVGs. Andrews saw two scraggly fighters round a severely shot-up pick-up truck. One went to light a Molotov cocktail, and Andrews opened up on them with a quick burst. The bottle exploded in the man's hand as a bullet passed through flesh, bone, and glass, spraying both of them with whatever flammable liquid was inside. The bullet hit with enough authority to vaporize some of the fuel, and the flaming wick set it alight—along with the two fighters. They screamed and rolled around on the floor, and Andrews serviced both of them with two shots each.

"You keep shooting like that, we don't have anything to worry about," Laird said, suitably impressed.

"You have to get them out of here, Jim," Andrews said. "We need to open the back door, but if all of us can't make it, you need to get Rachel and Lee out of here. We've already lost Spencer and probably Mulligan, so you guys are the last game in town."

"I get that. All right, let's pass the word." As Andrews started to rise, Laird grabbed his arm. "I'm not going to cut and run at the first sign of trouble, man. But if I have to, we'll hole up in the rig and cool our heels for a few. Choi knows the way, so if we get separated, you can still find us. Hooah?"

"Hooah," Andrews replied. "Get Leona squared away." He got to his feet and returned to his original position. As he slid down beside Kelly, he squeezed Rachel's shoulder.

"How you doing, hon?"

"I'm hanging in there, sweetie," Choi said, between rifle shots.

"I'm good," Rachel said.

"Awesome. You're falling back with the others. Choi-boy and I will hold the goblins back while you guys make a back door and get out of here."

"You and *who*?" Choi asked. Andrews ignored him.

"Where are we going?" Rachel wanted to know. "Aren't you coming with us?"

"Laird will give you the details, and yes, we'll be right behind you," Andrews said. He turned to Kelly. "Take Rachel to Jim. He'll brief you on what needs to happen."

"Roger that," Kelly said. "You ready to switch?"

"Affirmative," Andrews said. "On my count ... One, two, three!"

Kelly leapt from her firing position and Andrews replaced her. He shouldered his weapon and sighted on a target hiding behind the derelict hulk of an abandoned car. He fired two rounds through the sheet metal and was rewarded with a cry of pain. At the same time, another Molotov cocktail came cartwheeling toward him from the darkness to his right. Choi fired over his head, and the bottle exploded into a thousand glass fragments. The flaming wick still ignited the fuel the vessel carried, and liquid fire landed on the concrete. The glow ruined the efficiency of Andrews's night vision goggles, and he pushed them up on his forehead.

"Choi, I'm down to Mark One eyeballs," he said.

"Roger that, I've got good sightlines to our left, but the right is messed up for me too."

"Mike," Rachel started.

"All right, stand by to shift position," Andrews said. "I'm thinking that old truck over there—we might be able to climb into the cab and gain some elevation, so we're looking down on these fuckers instead of over at them."

"Movement over there," Choi said. He raised his rifle and fired into the darkness. Andrews could only see vague silhouettes.

"Mike!" Rachel said again. She grabbed his arm.

Andrews shook her off violently. "Are you fucking deaf? Go with Kelly. Go right now, Rachel!"

"Let's go," Kelly said, grabbing Rachel's arm. "We're leaving." Kelly yanked her to her feet, which was no small achievement, given that she was considerably smaller than Rachel. Rachel struggled against her for a moment, but Kelly dug in and yanked her toward her.

"I will fucking punch you in the face and carry you, Rachel," she threatened.

Faced with the threat of violence and the fact that Andrews and Choi were busy fighting, Rachel gave her husband one last glance. Andrews couldn't even spare her a quick nod, for at that moment a nearly emaciated woman came sprinting through the flickering flame to his right, carrying a sharpened metal spear. She shrieked as she bore down on him, holding the weapon like a pike, intending to run him through. Andrews twisted at the waist and fired two shots through her chest. Even though she couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds, the 5.56 millimeter rounds didn't pack enough punch to stop the woman's flight, so she careened right into Andrews at almost full speed. But the bullets had done their job—her heart had beat its last before she crashed into him, and the metal spear made a clanging sound as it fell to the floor. As it rolled under the car he crouched behind, Andrews kicked the corpse off him—just in time. Several more shapes erupted through the flames, screaming like banshees and carrying all manner of weapons.

With a flick of his finger, Andrews set the M416 to AUTO and chopped them down. Kelly turned and fired into the mob as well, driving the survivors stumbling back into the darkness. Two fallen enemies lay nearby, clad in stinking rags, their limbs twitching as they writhed and moaned in agony. Waning firelight made their spilt blood glisten and gleam.

"Kelly—"

"We're gone, Mike." Kelly grabbed Rachel again and yanked her after her as she sprinted toward the waiting Laird. Once Rachel's back was to him, Andrews flipped his rifle back to SEMI and quickly killed the two wounded attackers nearby, shooting them in the head. He was surprised he felt nothing; only a day ago, committing such an act would have been far beyond him, something akin to an atrocity. Now, he simply considered it killing the enemy before they could kill him.

*If someone presses your buttons hard enough, you'll find killing them is pretty easy.* The words Mulligan had spoken to him back at Harmony came to him suddenly, and in hindsight, Andrews felt a sudden squirt of embarrassment at how he had reacted to the big Special Forces soldier's statement.

The voice over his radio snapped him back to the present. "Andrews, Laird. We're linked up, and we're going for the door. We look to be in the clear. Over."

"Roger, Jim. We've got the front door."

"See you outside. Out."

"Let's roll, Choi," Andrews said. "Let's give these goons something nice and mobile to shoot at. You ready?"

"No, I'm not *ready!*" Choi said, the scorn plain in his voice. "Does that count for anything?"

"Nope."

"Well, balls. Okay, I've got the lead." The younger man fired a quick burst into the darkness in one direction, then pivoted and fired off a grenade from his M320 in the other. The grenade struck a support pillar several dozen yards away and exploded with a sudden *boom* and a flash that cast shadows through the garage. Before the echoes had even begun to fade, Choi was on his feet, running toward the truck he and Andrews had discussed. Andrews swore and pulled his NVGs down over his eyes—the flames to his right were sputtering, so NVG effectiveness was pretty much restored—and he ran after Choi as quickly as he could. Just in time. The car the two men had been using as a fighting position was suddenly bombarded with fully-automatic rifle fire. Muzzle flashes lit up the garage far to Andrews's right. The shooter leaned into the weapon and turned it toward him, walking the rounds toward him as he ran. Andrews juked to his right as hard as he could and shouldered up against a nearby support pillar. Bullets slammed into the stout cement post an instant later, scattering concrete chips across the floor as a small cloud of dust billowed in the air. The gunfire ended abruptly, and Andrews knew this was probably his only chance. Placing his left heel against the pillar, he turned at the waist and brought up his M416. Through the night vision goggles and the low-light scope on his rifle, he could see the man with the captured assault rifle struggling to reload it. Andrews fired two rounds and hit him directly in the center mass. The man dropped the rifle and slowly crumpled to the floor.

"In place, Captain," Choi said over the radio. A moment later, his rifle barked, and in the dark distance someone yelped. "I've got your advance covered!"

Andrews pushed away from the pillar and sprinted toward the truck, scanning left to right. He saw flashes of movement in the green-white world revealed by his NVGs. Several scraggly survivors were closing on them, leapfrogging from decaying car to decaying car, then flitting behind the thick concrete pillars. Muzzle flashes bloomed

from the darkened cab of the semi-truck as Choi opened fire on the survivors. He continued to fire on semi-automatic, rationing his ammunition as well as he could. Andrews ran to the truck and slammed into its dusty fender. The rig's tires were gone, either having rotted away or been stripped off for another use. The big vehicle sat on its belly, which meant there was no way anyone would be able to crawl under it and use it for cover. Andrews pressed his back against the truck's sheet metal and fiberglass body and shouldered his rifle, scanning for targets.

"Choi, can you see movement to your left?" he asked, creeping toward the front of the truck.

"I see 'em," Choi replied. "They're trying to sneak up on us. How bad of a hurting are we going to put on these guys, sir?" His voice was neutral, as if he were discussing a menu item.

Andrews looked around the truck's grille, weapon at ready. "As much of one as we need to, Choi. If they don't back off, they die."

"Hooah. I'm engaging with a forty." Choi fired another grenade out of the truck's windowless cab. It arced through the air and landed in the shell of a car several survivors were hiding behind. The explosion was tremendous, made even more so by the relatively tight confines of the parking garage. Andrews's NVGs were once again overwhelmed by the sudden flash as the high explosive round went off, fairly decimating the car and turning it into one giant shrapnel generator. The goggles cleared instantly once the flare dissipated, and he saw several shapes writhing about on the concrete floor, shrieking in agony, their bodies flayed open by the fusillade of whirling metal. Men, women, and to Andrews's shock, children lay in the blast radius, their screams of pain echoing through the garage.

"Oh man, are those fucking *kids*?" Choi said from the cab. "They brought their *kids* to the fight?"

"Hold it together, Tony," Andrews told him. "They did it to themselves; you didn't do shit." He shouted into the parking garage, raising his voice so it could be heard over the cries of the wounded. "Back off and no one else gets hurt! We're not here to harm you, we just want to get out of here! You can send two people to recover your wounded—we will not fire on you!"

In response, another Molotov cocktail came spinning through the darkness from their rear. It burst open against the rear of the truck's cab, spewing flaming liquid across it. Choi swore as some of the flaming accelerant landed inside the cab.

*They're behind us!* As Andrews spun to face the new threat, something struck him in the chest with enough force to throw him back against the truck. He kept his grip on his rifle and looked down. A metal arrow stuck out from the body armor covering his chest, right between two pockets that contained magazines of 5.56 millimeter ammunition. That he felt no pain was little comfort—he had no idea if the projectile had penetrated the ballistic trauma plating that lay beneath the composite layers of bullet-resistant armor that covered the surface of his vest. Until he felt it, he wasn't going to stop fighting. Realizing he was silhouetted against the ribbons of fire that raged across the back of the semi-truck's cab, he ducked to his left. Just in time, for another arrow slashed past, and this one ripped right through the truck's sheet metal cab without even slowing down.

“Choi, we’re taking fire from the rear! Laird, this is Andrews—we have OPFOR to our rear, they are between you and us! Over!”

“Roger that, Mike. We’re at the door now, start making your way toward us!” As Laird finished transmitting, a loud explosion tore through the garage as a forty-millimeter grenade did its work against the steel mesh garage door. Then two more explosions.

Choi leapt out of the doorless truck’s cab and landed beside Andrews. He fingered the firing selector on his rifle and ripped off a quick burst at a man standing fifty meters away, a huge longbow held in one hand. Both men fired at the same time, and Choi missed being killed by the man’s steel arrow by millimeters. The attacker spun and dove away, and Andrews didn’t know if he’d been hit or not. Choi glanced over at Andrews and saw the arrow sticking out from the center of his body armor.

“Man, that’s some shit, Captain,” he said, before returning to the task at hand.

There were two more resounding explosions from the far end of the garage, and stroboscopic flashes of light peeled back the darkness for an instant. Andrews saw flurries of movement to their rear, and he stood up and peered through the open cab of the truck. More figures raced toward it, using its bulk to camouflage their advance. Andrews cracked off two rounds, then his weapon clicked empty. He ejected the magazine, pulled another from his vest and slapped it in, hit the bolt release switch, and was back in business. The attackers had disappeared. He knew they were crouched down on the other side of the truck, which meant he and Choi were practically within knife-fighting distance. But they weren’t outfitted for close-quarters combat; their rifles weren’t short-barreled, and they had no sidearms—those were not part of the SCEV weapons loadout. The only thing the two men could do was put some distance between them and their attackers. He slapped Choi on the arm and pointed in the direction of Laird, Kelly, and Rachel.

“Let’s roll! When we get forty meters out, turn and drop a grenade on this thing!”

“Roger that,” Choi said, already sliding another forty-millimeter grenade into the M320. Both men set off at a sprint from the vehicle, and just in time. With a war cry, the attackers on the other side of the rig swarmed over it, hoping to catch the two men from behind. Andrews half turned and fired a burst at the dusty wreckage, aiming as best as he could while on the run. He needn’t have worried. When the bullets rained down among them, the attackers reversed course and dove back behind the hulk of metal.

“Laird, we’re heading your way!” Andrews said as another explosion tore through the garage.

“Great timing—we’re through over here! Speed it up! I’ll drop back and give you some cover!”

“Negative—get Rachel to Five! We’ll be right behind you!” Andrews ordered. Beside him, Choi slowed and turned, raising his rifle to his shoulder. At the same time, Andrews saw a burst of movement to his left and he spun, bringing his rifle sights on a small figure as it darted toward him. The boy was ragged and thin, his long, filthy hair tied back in a ponytail that seemed to go on forever. Through the NVGs, Andrews could see his every feature: wild eyes, foam building at the corners of his mouth, pockmarks on his face, the natty tunic he wore. He carried a single blade of steel that



was patinated by time and use, and his feet were wrapped in scraps of cloth. His thin arms were exposed, and a sheen of sweat stood out on them. He looked to be only six or seven years old, but given the apparent malnutrition that stole through the group of survivors that had made the shattered hulk of San Jose their home, he could have been twice that age.

"Stop there, or I'll shoot you!" Andrews shouted. Behind him, Choi's grenade launcher thumped, and an instant later another explosion shook the garage. Dust rained down from the ceiling and the boy slowed, frightened by the sudden fire and fury as Choi's grenade destroyed the semi-truck the rest of the attackers were hiding behind. More cries and screams of shock and agony reached Andrews's ears. The boy looked at the conflagration behind Andrews, his pace slowing; then his face hardened and he accelerated toward Andrews again, blade held high. He released a keening wail as he bore down on Andrews, his eyes full of hate and fear.

Andrews shot him once through the chest. The boy stumbled and fell, skidding and rolling across the dusty floor, his blade clattering as it slid across the concrete. The small figure came to a rest on his back, chest heaving, a bloody froth spilling from his mouth.

*Jesus ...*

Andrews snapped out of it and turned to Choi. "Come on, Tony—let's get the hell out of here!"

The two men sprinted toward the far end of the garage, where they could see the ragged hole that had been blown through the entrance door. Choi reached it first, and he knelt beside the opening, rifle at ready. An expended forty-millimeter grenade casing rolled across the concrete ramp when he brushed against it with one of his boots, tinkling as it bumped over metallic debris. There was no sign of Laird, Kelly, Leona, or Rachel, and Andrews hoped they were well on their way to SCEV Five.

"Go on," Choi said. "I've got your back."

Andrews tucked his rifle close to his body and lifted up one leg. The hole was only four feet tall and just shy of that wide, so he had to step through it carefully, lest he cut himself on the ragged metal edges. The night on the other side of the hole was cool and dry, and a light breeze cooled his sweat the instant he was out of the garage. He reached back inside and tapped Choi's shoulder and, a moment later, he stepped out as well.

"Got one banger left. I'm going to use it to hold those bastards back," Choi said. "Just in case they decide to come after us."

"Roger that, but let's make tracks," Andrews said. The street was deserted, filled with the detritus of passing years—shattered glass from the buildings, collapsed facades, fallen light poles, and stripped vehicles. Several hundred meters up the street, he saw Laird leading Kelly, Rachel, and Leona away. Rachel was supporting Leona, helping her navigate her way across the debris-strewn street.

"Jim, we're out of the garage and coming up behind you," he whispered into his headset. "Keep going, we'll keep a watch on the back door. Over."

"Roger," came Laird's quiet response.

Andrews and Choi pressed on, gravel and glass crunching beneath their boots. Choi kept turning and looking back at the garage, but he did not fire off his last

grenade. Apparently, their attackers weren't interested in pursuing them any further. Andrews was grateful.

Then he saw Laird stop. He turned and motioned Rachel and Leona to crouch as he and Kelly did the same thing. He brought his rifle to his shoulder and began firing bursts into the darkness.

*Shit.*

Behind him, Choi's grenade launcher went *thoomp* as it ejected its round, and a moment later, the harsh crack of an exploding grenade tore through the night. Andrews turned and saw several survivors writhing amidst the rubble, screaming in pain. Several more boiled through the hole in the garage door, and Choi clipped them with precision fire.

"Let's get to the other street so we can get a better angle on them!" Andrews said, hustling across the street's cracked pavement. Choi followed, walking backwards and firing a shot every second or so in an attempt to keep the rest of the enemy bottled up inside the garage. Andrews heard a scuffling noise from above, and he looked up in time to see several Molotov cocktails flying toward them, hurled by figures looking over the remaining portion of the civic center's roof.

"Choi, look out!" He raised his rifle and squeezed off a few rounds at the new set of attackers. They darted back behind the roofline as his bullets struck the retaining wall there, sending puffs of dust exploding into the night air. Then he and Choi were practically dancing in the streets as the bottles landed and shattered, spreading their flaming contents everywhere. From up the street, more gunfire sounded from Laird and Kelly.

"Mike, we've got a problem up here!" Laird said over the radio.

"Roger that, we've got goblins to the rear as well," Andrews told him as he flattened against the pockmarked wall of the building across the wide street. "Choi, keep the pressure on them, don't let them out of the garage!" He raised his rifle to his shoulder and targeted the roof of the civic center. He saw movement as several fighters slowly looked over the lip of the roofline, and he blew one of them away with a single shot. The heads dipped down again, and Andrews wished he had a grenade launcher of his own. He could lob a forty up there and ruin the rest of the night for several of the enemy. Beside him, Choi fired again and again, then stopped.

"Reloading!" he said, ejecting the spent magazine from his rifle. Andrews took up his firing position and drilled a survivor right through the chest as he started to shove himself through the ragged hole in the garage door. The figure cried out and fell back through the dark maw.

"Laird, how many combatants do you have up there?" Andrews asked. Beside him, Choi loaded a fresh mag into his rifle and resumed his position. Andrews returned to his examination of the roofline and saw someone quickly stand up to hurl another Molotov cocktail. Andrews shot him through the neck, and the figure fell away. An instant later, light blossomed as the cocktail exploded on the roof.

"Can't tell," Laird said, "but it's a lot of the bastards—we're taking some pretty accurate arrow fire up here, and they've got more of those Molotov cocktails as well. Our NVGs are pretty much garbage now. Over."

“Roger that. We’re trying to keep the outbreak contained back here, and we’re taking Molotovs as well. Over.”

Laird’s response was lost amidst an ululating chorus of war cries as over a dozen people stood up on the civic center’s roof, hurling Molotovs and firing arrows. Choi let out a frightened yelp as a metal arrow ricocheted off the wall beside him. Andrews flipped his rifle’s fire selector to full auto and raked the crowd overhead, sending several reeling back into the flame-lit darkness. An arrow slammed into the sidewalk between his feet, and he felt a nick of pain as something tugged at his right sleeve, above his elbow. He ignored it and kept firing, squeezing off measured bursts and trying to break up the enemy offensive.

“Keep on the garage door!” he shouted to Choi. At the same time, he heard more automatic gunfire from Laird’s position. A quick glance up the street sent a lance of horror through his chest. More survivors were advancing on Laird’s position.

And they had an armored truck.

“Jim, hit that thing with grenades!” he shouted over the radio. His rifle stopped firing, the bolt locked back—it was empty. “Reloading!” He ripped the expended mag from his weapon and pulled a fresh one from his vest.

“Fuck, me too!” Choi said as his own weapon fell silent. From Laird’s position, a grenade exploded, then another. Above the din, he heard a secondary noise, like a gunshot—but it didn’t sound like five-five-six NATO.

“Taking fire up here!” Laird said. “They’re using the truck as a combat platform!”

“Shoot it with a grenade!” Andrews repeated. He hit the bolt release on his rifle and cracked off two shots at the people emerging from the garage, missing them entirely.

He stepped to his right, realizing he’d been stationary for too long. The enemy had to know his position by now. He was right. An arrow wedged itself into the concrete facade right where he’d been standing, a shot that would have hit him directly in the forehead had he not moved. Choi was operational then, and he engaged the enemy combatants emerging from the garage. He missed just as often as he hit, and sparking explosions dappled the steel door as bullets flattened against it. Another detonation sounded from up the street, but Andrews couldn’t check on the circumstances there as he fired on the enemy combatants who clung to the civic center’s roof. He fired at one, and the bullet-riddled corpse tumbled off the edge and fell headlong to street.

“These guys are gonna get us, they’ve got the high ground!” Choi said, an edge of panic in his voice.

“Laird, SITREP!” Andrews said.

“We’ve hit that armored car with two grenades and we’ve managed to stop it, but the fuckers are using it for cover—we can’t shoot through it, and Kelly and I can’t take it by ourselves! We need you up here!”

Andrews heard the crackle of gravel down the street, as if something was making its way toward them. He started to look that way, but three archers stood up on the civic center’s roof and raised their bows. He engaged them immediately.

“Roger th—”

“*Get down!*” Choi slammed into him suddenly, driving Andrews to the rubble-littered ground. An arrow slashed into the pavement only inches from his face, pelting

him with concrete chips. He struggled against Choi, trying to pull his rifle out from beneath him and return fire.

“Choi, what the—”

The night erupted into fury as great gouts of flame seemed to arc up the street, turning night into day. A furious ripping sound cut through the air. Andrews turned, looking toward Laird’s position, and saw the armored truck facing them was being slowly *demolished* in great, sparking explosions that sent bits and pieces of it flying through the air. Laird and the others cowered before the tremendous fusillade, and the enemies facing them jerked and spun as arms and legs were blown off their bodies. The corpses essentially disintegrated where they stood, and Andrews wondered what kind of hell had been unleashed upon the world. The ground beneath him vibrated, the shuddering growing with each passing second as the raucous din grew louder. He heard Choi whoop suddenly, an abrupt exultation of joy that seemed misplaced. Then Andrews became aware of another noise, a mounting whine that deepened into a bellow.

A gas turbine engine coming to life.

SCEV Five rolled to a halt right beside them, the turreted miniguns in its slanted nose spitting bursts of 7.62 millimeter death up the street. The opponents that faced Laird and the others broke and ran, but the firing didn’t stop—the fleeing combatants were chopped down as they fled. The SCEV’s outer airlock door cycled open, and the LED lights inside snapped on. The rig’s armored bulk shielded them from the fighters on the rooftop, rendering their arrows ineffective. As if to underscore just how the tide had changed, the missile pod on the SCEV’s back quickly extended into firing position, rotated toward the civic center, and promptly sent a projectile lancing into the structure’s side. Riding a column of fire, the missile tore through the civic center’s outer wall and exploded deep inside, causing the remains of the roof to suddenly bow upwards before it collapsed inward in a rising cloud of dust.

“Andrews, you guys had better get in. The meter’s running, and I’m low on quarters,” a voice said over his radio. Even in the heat of battle, Command Sergeant Scott Mulligan managed to sound completely bored.

“About time we rated door-to-door service!” Choi said as he pushed himself off of Andrews and climbed to his feet.

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“Mulligan! You’re not *dead*?” Andrews said as he bolted into the cockpit. Mulligan was strapped into the pilot’s seat, so he slipped into the copilot’s seat and buckled himself in. Mulligan looked like hell—he clearly represented the three Bs: battered, bloodied, and bruised.

“That’s a matter of personal opinion,” Mulligan said. A chime sounded as the airlock indicators went from red to green, and the big man pushed the control column forward. The SCEV responded like a tiger that had just slipped out of its cage, its engines shrieking as its huge tires spun, seeking purchase on the debris-littered ground. Every now and then, a tinny *tink* and *clunk* reached Andrews’s ears. Despite

the rig's firepower, the denizens of San Jose were still trying to put up a fight, launching whatever they had at the SCEV as it barreled down the street.

"I've got the guns," Andrews said, slipping on his headset and taking over the fire control systems. A window opened up on the infrared overlay that was projected on the viewport—a digital targeting system, which allowed him to control the turreted miniguns on the rig's nose. But there was nothing to fire on; all of Law's people were laying low.

"Roger, you have the guns," Mulligan said.

"Laird, Andrews—check your six, we're rolling up on your position. Get everyone ready to board. Over."

"Roger that," Laird responded immediately.

Ahead, Andrews saw Laird and Kelly marshal Leona and Rachel to the other side of the street so they would be in a better position to board the rig when it came to halt.

"Choi, override the inner airlock door! We're going to want to board them as quickly as we can," Andrews shouted.

"Roger that!" Choi responded. "I'm on it!"

"Get them aboard ASAP. We'll be vulnerable when we come to a stop, and it's not like we have three hundred sixty degrees of coverage," Mulligan said as he slowed the SCEV. When it rumbled just past Laird's position, he braked it to a shuddering halt. The huge vehicle skidded several feet across the loose debris. Andrews reached for the FLIR yoke and twisted it from right to left; the FLIR turret panned in response, and he watched the projected overlay, looking for any signs of life. Motionless bodies lay near the immolated armored truck, the figures glowing dully, still warm against the chilly night. Ghostly pools formed around them—blood, slowly cooling in the nighttime breeze. In the distance, he caught a glimpse of figures moving through the ground floor of a devastated building. He rolled the targeting bracket on them, his thumb hovering above the FIRE button.

*Do it! They want us dead, so do it to them first!*

He crushed the button beneath his thumb. The two miniguns blared, firing long streams of high-powered ammunition at the building. The infrared overlay revealed the destruction caused by the sudden salvo of 7.62 millimeter bullets as they slashed across the building's floor. Two shapes went down, blasted into pieces by the deadly hail of steel rain. More escaped being blown into oblivion, and Andrews felt a small—but not unexpected—twinge of relief in his gut. He knew he'd reached his limit, had had his fill of killing for the moment.

"Having an attack of the mercies, are you?" Mulligan said.

"What?"

"You didn't slew the guns to the left—you could have taken the rest of them down." His voice was neutral, revealing neither compliment nor reproach.

"All aboard!" Choi shouted from the second compartment. "Airlock sealed!"

Laird shoved his way into the cockpit. A big grin split his handsome, grime-covered face when he saw Mulligan.

"Well, I'll be damned. You must have an angel in your corner, Sarmajor!" He slapped the bigger man on the shoulder.

Mulligan winced at the contact. "The devil in my detail's averaging everything out."

“Jim, get everyone squared away,” Andrews said. “We’ve still got some work to do, so we’ll decon once we secure the supports and clear the city. Sarmajor, you good to take us back to the warehouse?”

“Absolutely, sir. I’m a hundred percent operational.” He set the SCEV back into motion, accelerating past the wrecked armored truck. “And the sooner we get there, the better ... These guys’ll figure out where we’re headed soon enough, and we’d better get gone before they can corner us again.”

“I’ll give you one great big hooah on that, Sarmajor,” Andrews said, as Laird retreated from the cockpit.

THE SUN WAS already kissing the eastern horizon by the time the SCEV made it back to the manufacturing complex, turning the sky from midnight black to cobalt blue, then to ever-brightening shades of red, orange, and yellow. As Mulligan drove the big rig across the parking lot, Andrews watched the side of the warehouse loom large in the viewports. Mulligan cranked the yoke hard to the left, and the big vehicle turned obediently, leaning hard to the right as it did so. Even Andrews was surprised by the sudden movement, and he was strapped into the copilot's seat. He heard Laird swearing up a storm in the back as he and anyone else who wasn't already strapped down had to scramble to find handholds before they were hurled off their feet.

"Take it easy, Mulligan!" Andrews barked.

"I'll take it easy when I'm dead," Mulligan replied. He brought the rig to a halt just shy of the door the team had entered through day before, then crawled forward until the entrance was directly across from the airlock. Laird stormed into the cockpit and glared down at Mulligan.

"Sergeant Major, what the hell do you think you're doing to my rig?" he snapped.

"Just breaking it in, Captain," Mulligan said, unperturbed. An ugly bruise was spreading across the right side of his face, and Andrews noticed his right eye was red with broken blood vessels.

"Mulligan, you don't look so hot," Andrews said, suddenly concerned.

"I'm good to go, sir. The second I start losing the edge, I'll let you know."

Laird bent down and looked at Mulligan closely. "Holy shit, you really *do* look like hell, Sarmajor." All traces of anger had left his voice.

Mulligan swiveled his eyes toward Laird. "Ladies, I'm touched by your never-ending concern for my well-being, but maybe you should stop commenting on my less-than-stellar looks and get the goddamned core supports?" His voice was a harsh rasp.

"We're on it, Sergeant Major. You stay put and keep an eye on things," Andrews said as he unbuckled his harness.

"You might find this useful, sir." Mulligan reached into one of the cargo pockets and pulled out a neatly folded piece of paper. Andrews took it and unfolded it. It was the manifest from the warehouse detailing the location of the core supports.

"Great work, Sarmajor. We'll have Eklund come forward and keep an eye on things with you."

"Gee, thanks," Mulligan said, turning away and looking out the viewport to his left.

"Is there a problem with that, Mulligan?" Andrews pushed the seat back and rose to his feet, crouching slightly to avoid hitting the overhead panel.

"Negative, Captain." Mulligan hesitated. "But please hurry. I think Eklund has the hots for me."

Andrews exchanged a look with Laird, and both men snorted. Andrews gently patted Mulligan's beefy shoulder.

"Well, I'm sure there are worse things in life, Mulligan."

"I can't think of any, sir."

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It wasn't tough to find the supports, since Mulligan had saved the manifest he'd found during their earlier foray into the structure. Andrews, Laird, Rachel, Choi, and Kelly suited up and armed themselves for the extra-vehicular activity, and Andrews led the group to where the supports were supposed to be. He saw the signs of struggle from when Law's people had taken Spencer, and he wondered how long they had until they arrived. He knew one of the survivors' network of tunnels extended to the warehouse; it was the only way they had managed to get the drop on the SCEV Four team.

"Yes," Rachel said over the radio as she bent over the open shipping crate. "Yes, these are the supports. They're in great shape, too." She straightened and looked back at Andrews. "We should take four, at least. We only need two, but we need some safeties."

"How can we tell if they're structurally sound?" Laird asked.

"We can't, but they're extremely dense. It would take a significant amount of energy to deform them, and this area of the city," she waved one arm at the warehouse, "didn't seem to get hit by a direct nuclear strike, so it's very unlikely their composition has been altered by ionization."

Laird turned to Andrews and shrugged. "Well, okay."

"Let's get going," Andrews said. "Rachel, go back to the rig. Choi, Jordello, you guys stand guard. Keep aware of what's going on around you at all times—we'll need you to provide security while Laird and I move some of these things to the vehicle. Questions?" No one had any, so Andrews turned to Laird and nodded toward the shipping crate. "Okay, let's do this."

Kelly and Choi escorted Rachel back to the waiting SCEV, then returned to stand guard over the two captains as they went to work on the supports. They had a special dolly with them that was motorized, so they wouldn't have to carry the supports all the way back to the SCEV themselves; since each support weighed almost four hundred pounds, that was a huge plus. Yet getting them out of the container was a struggle, and it took almost ten minutes to load one on the dolly. Then their return to the rig was limited by the dolly's slow rate of speed. Andrews was sweating profusely beneath his environmental suit and respirator assembly, and through the visor of his facemask, he could see Laird was as well.

"Man, this is going to suck," Laird gasped over the radio.

"You think it's bad now? Wait until we have to get them in the rig and store them in the locker," Andrews said. "We'll both have herniated discs by the time we're through."

"Thanks, man. Thanks so much."

Andrews was right. While extracting the core support from the container had been arduous, getting it off the dolly and into the airlock required some Herculean effort on their part. Stowing it in the SCEV's tight confines was a hellish nightmare; it seemed



like there just wasn't enough room for them to move while struggling with the support's incredible weight. Rachel wanted to help, but both men warned her away; if someone lost their grip, the result would be a shattered floor plate, or worse, a crushed foot. They finally managed to wrangle the support into the floor-level locker without causing any injuries.

"Okay," Andrews gasped when they had secured the support. "On to the next one."

"Man, this is kickin' my ass," Laird said.

"Better that than leaving everyone in Harmony to die, Captain," Mulligan said over the radio. He and Leona were listening in to their commo from the cockpit.

"You're a hell of a motivational speaker, Sarmajor," Laird said.

"I am a man of many talents, sir."

Andrews waved Laird to the open airlock door. A beeping alarm sounded every ten seconds, telling the crew the obvious: both doors were open, and the potential for internal contamination was increasing. Andrews led Laird outside, then he cycled the airlock closed.

They repeated the sequence twice more before they had to stop to rest. With three supports aboard, Andrews was motivated to bust some ass and secure the last one, but both he and Laird were almost dead on their feet. They drank from the hydration packs they carried on their backs and leaned against the SCEV for a few minutes, catching their breath and trying to regain their strength. Andrews's legs and arms felt rubbery, and his back and shoulders ached. His forearms burned, and he knew the pain would just increase over the coming days as abused muscles, tendons, and connective tissue grew inflamed.

*But it's still nothing compared to what Law could do ...*

"Mulligan, this is Andrews," he said.

"Go ahead, Captain. Over."

"Do you know anything about some special weapons programs that could turn a man into ..." Andrews paused, trying to figure out how to explain it. "Into some kind of super-warrior? A man who could inflict incredible pain just by *thinking* about it?"

"Lieutenant Eklund has been briefing me on the individual called Law, Captain. No, I'm unaware of such a program, but it wouldn't surprise me. I did know of a program called OMEGA, where soldiers were subjected to nanite treatments that increased their ability to heal and gave them superior strength and endurance, but as far as I know, it was never fielded. As a matter of fact, Congress passed legislation to outlaw activities like that, but I guess the CIA or whoever created this Law bozo never got the memo. Over."

"I wonder how he could have survived all this time," Andrews said, more to himself than Mulligan.

"Nanites are interesting little machines, sir. They can self-replicate and continue doing their job for as long as there's enough raw material to keep the process going. Have no idea if this is the case with that Law guy, but I'll tell you what—let's not hang around to find out. Are you guys about done with your smoke break, Captain? Over."

Laird pushed himself away from the SCEV tiredly. "Yeah, yeah, yeah," he groused.

"You guys want to trade places?" Kelly asked. "You can stand overwatch while Choi and I get the last one."

"Negative, there's no reason for all of us to risk getting injured," Andrews said. "We've got it. Just keep doing what you're doing."

"Take it easy, Mike," Kelly cautioned. "It's a long way back to Harmony, and I'd hate it if you guys were laid up for the entire run."

"We'll take care of it," Laird said, his tone terse and clipped. Andrews could tell his fellow officer was getting awfully close to his limits.

"Easy, man," he said.

Laird shot him a thumbs-up. "I'm all right, Mike. Don't worry."

"SCEV Five to all troops—once you've stopped sharing this tender moment, I'm going to have to ask you guys to cut some butt. We're being scouted. I have visual contact on several OPFOR glassing us from another building down the block. I can engage, but they're right on the edge of azimuth violation for the minis. Over."

"How many, Mulligan?" Andrews asked. As he and Laird struck out for the last support, Kelly and Choi flanked them. If they were going to be attacked, it would be while they were away from the SCEV. Both of them held their rifles at low ready. Laird towed the dolly along after him, kicking up dust as he ran.

"I see three, but that doesn't mean jack. There could be fifty more on the other side of the building. You guys need to decide if that last support is worth it. Over."

"It is," Andrews replied. "Mulligan, if we get into a furball, you need to leave right away. You got that?"

"Sorry, Captain. Your transmission's breaking up. Over."

Andrews almost laughed. He had expected a terse acknowledgement of the order and nothing else. After all, Mulligan was the one who was supposed to babysit the others and make sure the mission was completed. And here they were with goblins approaching, and he wasn't going to leave the others behind without a fight. Andrews had to admit he was impressed by the old soldier's attitude.

"They like to get up high and attack from there," Andrews said as he crawled into the crate and grabbed another support. "You guys keep your eyes open, and if you see movement, open up. There's no one friendly out here."

"Roger that," Kelly said, taking up a guard position on one side of the warehouse aisle. Choi hung back, positioning himself so he could see the doorway to his left and maintain watch on the other side of the warehouse.

Andrews and Laird grunted and strained, struggling to get the last support out of the crate. They finally managed to do it, but at the last moment, Laird lost his grip. With a yelp, he jumped back, and Andrews felt his end of the support slide out of his hands. The support slammed to the concrete floor with a tremendous crash, blasting a deep crater into the cement, sending chips flying.

"Goddamn it, Laird!" he shouted.

"Sorry," Laird said. "Come on, let's get this thing loaded up—"

"Captain Andrews? You there, my friend?"

The sudden voice over the radio made everyone freeze in place. Laird looked up at Andrews, the question visible in his eyes, as Kelly and Choi shifted uncomfortably. Andrews felt a stab of fear run through his heart.

It was Law. And if he was broadcasting on their frequency ...

"Mulligan, position of SCEV Four!" Andrews shouted, panic plain in his own voice.

"Negative contact," Mulligan reported back, and there was an almost embarrassed quality to his voice. "Sorry, sir. We weren't paying attention to Four's transponder data. It's been shut off. Recommend you get back immediately. Over."

Laird bent over, struggling to get a grip on the support. "Come on, let's get this thing—"

"Everybody back to the rig!" Andrews grabbed Laird's arm and yanked him away from the support. "*Now!*"

"Too late, my friend," Law whispered over the radio.

The warehouse became a living hell. From outside came the long, drawn-out ripping sound of miniguns firing, their six-barreled, electrically driven guns pumping out four thousand 7.62 millimeter projectiles per minute. The barrage ripped through the warehouse's shell as if it were made from wet paper towels, opening up great holes through which harsh sunlight poured. The bullets continued across the warehouse, decimating ancient shipping crates and sending splintered wood and fragmented metal whirling through the air like a vicious, barbed cyclone. Steel shelving units rocked back and forth, and as Andrews ran down the aisle, he heard all manner of shrapnel strike the crates and shelves around him. Outside, he heard SCEV Five's turbine engine begin to wail to life, and then another minigun blast exploded into being as Five opened fire on another target.

"Mulligan, SITREP!" Andrews yelled.

"Taking out their observers, Captain. No visual on Four, and I'm prepping to evac. Over."

"We're on our way!" Andrews followed Kelly and Laird as they turned the corner. Choi remained where he was, rifle at the ready, finger on the trigger. Another salvo of minigun fire tore through the structure from the opposite side of the warehouse, and Andrews flinched as something cracked past his head. He signaled Choi to head out, and the young Asian man did as instructed, running in a crouch for the door. Andrews turned the corner and saw the bright rectangle of light ahead of him. The SCEV's airlock was already open, and he watched as first Kelly, then Laird, vaulted up the short stairway and into the rig's interior. Then Choi emerged into the bright sunlight, and he skidded to a stop beside the stairway and squatted there, keeping an eye toward the SCEV's rear. He raised his rifle and started shooting immediately.

"They're coming up behind us!" he screamed over the radio, releasing a burst on full automatic.

"Get aboard!" Andrews shouted. Tinny *clanks* and *clinks* filled the air, and he felt projectiles hitting him with enough force to pierce his suit. A spiderweb of cracks filled one corner of his visor, and he realized Law's rounds were passing through the warehouse and slapping into the SCEV, disintegrating when they hit the rig's dense, armored hide. He scrambled up the stairs and launched himself through the small airlock, spinning around on the other side and reaching back for Choi. Choi bolted up the stairs and slammed into him, sending both of them reeling.

"Mulligan—*go!*" Andrews yelled. The SCEV lurched into motion and it sped away from the warehouse—in *reverse*.

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"What are you doing?" Leona shouted from the right seat.

"They've already scouted us, so they know our orientation," Mulligan said tightly. "They probably have a kill box set up ahead, where your pal the Law is sitting pretty in SCEV Four, waiting to put a missile up our ass as we come around the corner. Sit tight, Lieutenant—unless these fuckers have an Abrams squirreled away somewhere, the other rig is our biggest obstacle."

"But he knows how to use it!" Leona said. She sat rigid in her seat, fear etched into her face, her eyes wild.

"He might know how to *drive* an SCEV, but he doesn't know how to *fight* in an SCEV," Mulligan said. "I'll bet you dollars to doughnuts he's sitting in a fixed position, hosing the warehouse, trying to flush us out. And we'll do what he wants, just not the way he wants us to do it." As he kept the rig hurtling backward, Mulligan's thick fingers danced over the center console. He raised the missile pod into firing position and brought up a targeting window on the viewport. He saw through the external cam feed broadcast to one of the displays on the instrument panel that Choi was right—there were about ten or so combatants behind them, obviously placed to add urgency to the situation and force the SCEV to expedite its departure. But they hadn't expected the rig to come right at them, and they dove behind the corner of the warehouse as the SCEV bolted backwards.

"Lieutenant, you want to hose those guys with some minigun fire while I tend to everything else?" Mulligan asked. "I'll pull past the warehouse and bring the nose to the right once we're clear, so all you'll have to do is fire. You don't even have to kill any of them, just get them out of our way. Hooah?"

"Hooah," Leona said, and she seemed to throw her fear into a corner as she pushed back her dark hair. She took hold of the fire control yoke on her side of the cockpit. "Guns up!"

"Stand by," Mulligan said. He held the control column back until it almost reached the control stop, and the rig's turbine engines bellowed with power. Then the vehicle flew past the corner of the warehouse, and he brought the column to the left while applying the brakes. The rig slewed crazily, its nose abruptly tracking to the right as a cloud of burnt rubber began to form outside. Leona pressed the firing button on the yoke, and the twin miniguns mounted on the SCEV's nose erupted as they vomited forth a salvo of destruction. The ten or so enemy combatants there didn't stand a chance—eight of them went down in spreading explosions of gore while the remaining two dived for the dirt and curled up in fetal positions, likely waiting for Death to tap them on the shoulder and inform them they were required elsewhere. Leona could have set up that meeting by depressing the guns just a few degrees, but she didn't, and Mulligan wondered why. Not that it mattered to him one whit. They had bigger fish to fry, then they would leave San Jose to rot in the powerful sunlight.

"Mulligan, what's the op?" Andrews appeared in the cockpit doorway, and he wedged himself between the seats.

"I'm going to see what I can do about SCEV Four," Mulligan told him. "We can't have that bat-shit crazy dude you guys say leads these morons taking us out from behind when we try to get the hell out of Dodge."

"I agree, but what are you going to do?"

"Don't know. Let's find out, shall we?"

"Uh—" Whatever sage advice Andrews was about to impart was cut off when Mulligan set the SCEV in motion once again, its big tires screeching on the parking lot's cracked surface as it accelerated forward, pulling parallel to the rear of the warehouse. The surviving combatants there tried to make themselves even smaller and, for a moment, Mulligan considered running them over, but he dismissed the notion. They were combat ineffective, and the team from Harmony Base had likely taken more than its pound of flesh during the night. The SCEV barreled to the other side of the warehouse and accelerated into the parking lot on the other side. A flurry of projectiles struck the rig's left side, and Mulligan grunted. Apparently, his opponent wasn't quite as predictable as he'd hoped.

Looking to the left, he saw SCEV Four slam its way through the rotting hulk of two cars, sending the metal carcasses tumbling across the parking lot. The miniguns on the rig's sloped bow were blazing away, raking SCEV Five with dozens of tungsten-cored rounds. If the SCEV had been more insubstantial—like the armored truck Law's people had tried to use as a gunnery platform earlier—then the crew from Harmony would have been in deep shit. But the rig's armor was thick and ballistically tolerant. It would take more than 7.62 millimeter to do anything but dimple its hide and mar its paint. Unfortunately, SCEV Four was also equipped with Hellfire missiles, and Mulligan wasn't keen on sticking around to see if Law knew how to use them.

"Time to boogie," he said, more to himself than Andrews and Leona. He kept the rig accelerating straight on, and it crashed through the fence on the other side of the parking lot and hurtled down a mostly vacant street. The rig's Hellfires were radar-guided, so if he could get Law to follow him down the comparatively narrow city streets, then the chances of him scoring a hit would be reduced. Even millimeter-wave radar was subject to ground clutter, and despite their versatility and high-tech systems, the SCEVs hadn't been designed for street fighting.

"Lieutenant, set the chaff dispensers to pop off automatically if we get a launch detection, and take the safeties off the root beers," Mulligan told her. Each rig carried six pan-shaped anti-missile warheads that could be launched from the rig's sides to intercept an incoming projectile. Essentially flying claymore mines, the AMWs—called 'root beers' by old timers such as Mulligan because AMW sounded a lot like A&W—would detonate in the path of an incoming missile or rocket and explode, sending a crescent of ball bearings flying into the projectile's path. The idea was that the missile would strike the steel wall and be damaged so severely that it would be unable to hit its target.

In theory, anyway.

"Done," Leona said.

From the rear of the SCEV, they heard something like hail hitting metal.

"Hey, we're taking fire back here!" Laird shouted.

"It's Four," Andrews told him. "Everyone strap in." He turned to Mulligan. "You planning on outrunning him?"

"Not much chance in that, sir. He's running a lot lighter than we are, so he's going to have the edge on us when it comes to speed and maneuverability. But I'm thinking I might have a surprise or two up my sleeve." He nodded toward a multistory building

ahead, its exterior battered and worn by war and earthquakes and the passing years. It was a fairly tall and narrow structure, one of what had once been known as pocket skyscrapers—structures that were built on small parcels of land yet provided a remarkable amount of floor space due to their height. In heavily urban environments, they'd become wildly popular in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Many of them had been the cause of numerous lawsuits, because several had proven to be death traps. Mulligan hoped he'd picked a lucky one.

"You're going to lose him in that building?" Leona asked.

"Nope, but he's going to lose us. Captain, can you visually confirm everyone is strapped in?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Andrews turn and look into the next compartment. "Roger that."

"You might want to hang on, sir. If this thing has a basement, we might wind up severely fucked."

"Yeah, well, maybe you might want to think about this again," Andrews said.

Mulligan shook his head. "Nah."

An alarm sounded, and something went *poof* from somewhere on top of the rig. Mulligan felt the pucker factor increase then, and half an instant later, a Hellfire missile ripped right over the speeding SCEV. It had passed through the radar-blinding chaff the rig had fired, and the seeker head in the missile's nose hadn't had the time to reacquire the vehicle when it emerged from the blinding cloud. With the target lost, the missile went into a steep climb so that it might be able to reacquire SCEV Five from a greater altitude. It never had a chance; it disappeared into a ball of flame and fury when it slammed into the pocket skyscraper. The building shook, shedding whatever layers of glass it still had, like a man brushing snow from his overcoat on a brisk winter day. A blizzard of rubbish cascaded to the street below like a filthy waterfall.

"How far behind us is that fucker?" Mulligan asked.

"A little less than two hundred meters," Leona reported. "Do you want the radar display added to your tactical overlay?"

"I'm good, Lieutenant. Too many pretty lights in front of me gets me all distracted." As the rig bore down on the building, Mulligan found he couldn't hold the tension back any longer. The palm of his left hand was slick with sweat, and if not for the light stippling on the control column's grip, it might have slipped out of his hand. He found himself pressing his back into his seat, and the harness's shoulder straps loosened a bit before the retractors took up the slack. As the vehicle sped on, he could see the building's lobby, empty of everything save some fallen ceiling tiles, shattered glass, an ancient reception desk, and several large empty pots that might have once held decorative saplings.

The SCEV crashed through the empty window frames, parting them like a ship's bow cleaving through a heavy sea. The rig bounced up and down as it hurtled across the marble floor and crushed the reception desk into thousands of splinters, then it burst through the framework on the other side of the building and into the street beyond.

"Lieutenant, your vehicle!" Mulligan snapped, and he released the control column. The SCEV began to slow immediately, and Leona hurriedly grabbed the column on

her side of the cockpit. The SCEV accelerated forward again as Mulligan reached for the fire control yoke. A tactical overlay sprang to life on the viewport before him, and he activated the missile pod. He rotated it one hundred eighty degrees, deselected the missile safeties, and dead-fired two Hellfires right at the building. The two projectiles leapt out of the pod, accelerating to their peak velocity of Mach 1.3 within two hundred yards of launch. Not that the speed was really required; the building wasn't about to take evasive action, after all. Both weapons slammed into the structure within milliseconds of each other, right as SCEV Four drew near. Each missile was equipped with a blast fragmentation sleeve warhead capable of defeating reinforced concrete bunkers—in fact, the warhead had been developed specifically for that purpose. The dual explosions were nothing short of remarkable, and the concussive force of the blasts essentially gutted two of the building's lower floors, wiping out everything from sheetrock to thick I-beams that provided core support. The building began to pancake, instantly imploding in a gigantic cloud of dust that mushroomed into the air.

"Holy *shit!*" Andrews remarked, watching the video from the rear surveillance camera. "I don't believe it!"

"Me either," Mulligan said dryly, taking a moment to crack his knuckles. "Hopefully that son of a bitch drove right into it, so it'll be lights out for him." He looked at Andrews, still crouching between the seats and staring at the display. There was no sign of SCEV Four. "Don't worry, Captain. I'm sure Benchley will send us back to dig it out. The guy might be a general, but he's also a hell of a bean counter."

Andrews snorted, then looked at Mulligan directly. "I think the general might be a little more understanding of what the real world is about, Sarmajor. After all, he's the one who assigned you to the mission, and look what we ran into."

"Hey, I'm just glad it wasn't wall-to-wall boredom." Mulligan felt suddenly uncomfortable beneath Andrews's gaze, and he cleared his throat self-consciously.

*When was the last time someone paid you a compliment? When was the last time you did something for someone else?*

He shook his head and glanced at Leona. She glanced at him as well, and there was something in her eyes bordering on hero worship. Mulligan had to force himself not to groan in disgust.

"My vehicle, Lieutenant," he said, taking the control column in his left hand. "Captain, with your permission, I think it's time we head home."

"Damn straight, Sergeant Major. Damn straight."

**T**WO HOURS LATER, SCEV Five was slowly climbing up the rim of the Santa Clara Valley, leaving the shattered metropolis of San Jose behind. Mulligan refused to vacate the pilot's seat, so Andrews helped Leona out of the cockpit and asked Kelly to check her wounded leg. She had already cleaned and dressed the wound during the time they made their way back to the warehouse, but Andrews wanted it looked at again. The last thing they needed was for Leona's wound to become septic while they were out in the field. He then claimed the copilot's seat and strapped in while Kelly tended to Leona; Laird and Choi continued with decon procedures. He paid particular attention to the ground-search radar, looking for any sign of SCEV Four. There was no indication they were being pursued, which was a relief.

"How're you hanging in, Sergeant Major?" Andrews asked as the rig bumped its way toward the remnants of Highway 130, a twisting road that cut through the foothills surrounding the valley. Blocked in places by old mudslides, the road was just barely navigable. It was also fairly flat, which made it preferable to striking out overland.

"Still operational, Captain." Mulligan kept his eyes on the road, weaving around the occasional rotting husk of a long-abandoned motor vehicle. While he continued to handle the SCEV with impressive dexterity, Andrews was becoming worried. The sergeant major's face was puffy from swelling, and there was dried blood in his dark hair from a small scalp laceration.

"Maybe you should kick back for a while," he suggested. "Let Laird or Choi come forward and—"

"I'm good to go, Captain," Mulligan said.

Then his head dipped forward, and his hand slipped off the control column. The SCEV began to slow immediately, drifting to the left and bouncing over the remains of a rock-studded earth slide. Mulligan's head bobbed from side to side, and for a moment, Andrews thought the older man was joking, but it became apparent that he had passed out, held in place by his safety harness. Andrews seized the copilot's column and brought the rig to a halt.

"Mulligan?" Andrews reached over the center console and shook the sergeant major gently. There was no response; he was out cold.

"Guys, I need a hand up here!"

Laird appeared almost instantly. His hair was wet, and he wore only a mustard-yellow T-shirt and his duty uniform trousers. He had apparently just stepped out of the small shower in the rear of the SCEV.

"What the hell happened?" he asked, bending over Mulligan. He put his fingers against the bigger man's neck, feeling for a pulse.

"He just passed out," Andrews said, unbuckling his safety harness after setting the rig's parking brake. He pushed the seat back and got to his feet, crouching over the



center console. "He still has a pulse, right?"

"Yeah. I guess that means he's really *not* a robot," Laird said. He unfastened Mulligan's harness and supported him when he slouched forward. "Hey, Sergeant Major! Can you hear me?"

Mulligan made a small groan, but didn't respond in a meaningful way. Laird looked over at Andrews.

"Looks like a concussion," he said. "Or maybe worse."

Andrews didn't like that. Everyone onboard knew first aid, and both Leona and Kelly Jordello were qualified medics, but a brain injury was something they were ill-equipped to handle.

"All right, let's get him out of here," Andrews said.

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It took almost an hour for Law to extract SCEV Four from the collapsed building that had encased almost half the rig. Law had thought for certain he was going to perish in the collapse; even though he had slowed his pursuit of SCEV Five to avoid being crushed to death beneath the mass of the small office tower as it pancaked, several upper floors had suddenly tilted over, falling directly onto the street. Law had thrown the rig in reverse immediately, but the vehicle had been caught inside the debris field's leading edge.

Remarkably, he survived.

More importantly, so had SCEV Four.

It took time to back the rig out of its near-tomb. Reversing, advancing, reversing again, the big vehicle shuddered as its tires sought purchase in its bid to retreat from the wreckage's embrace. Finally, it did just that, and bright sunlight lanced through the dust covering the vehicle's viewports as debris rolled off its snout in a small avalanche. Law continued to back the SCEV away from the mound of rubble until it sat in the middle of the next intersection. Only then did he relax and roll the engine condition levers to IDLE. The twin turbine engines slowly spun down to a low whine, and Law knew it was absolutely miraculous that they hadn't ingested debris and destroyed themselves.

Shapes surrounded the idling vehicle, approaching cautiously, fearfully. Law watched them draw near, and he chopped the fuel to the engines, shutting them down. Cool air whispered over him courtesy of the vehicle's environmental system, and he sat where he was for a time, taking a moment to simply luxuriate in something he never thought he'd inhale again—clean, purified air.

He unstrapped himself and pushed the pilot's seat against the bulkhead, then left the cockpit. He cycled open the inner airlock and stepped inside the small room. The inner door closed and, after a moment, the outer clamshell doors opened, rising on well-oiled hydraulic rams. Law squinted at the harsh, unfiltered sunlight that greeted him, inhaling air tainted with dust. It was a warm day, almost eighty degrees now, and he pulled a filthy balaclava over his head. Direct exposure to sunlight was no longer a good thing; since the nuclear detonations had virtually eradicated the planet's ozone layer, it was taking Mother Earth quite some time to replenish it. Prolonged exposure

to sunlight could result in all manner of vicious skin cancers, so Law and his family avoided it as much as they could. Indeed, those who walked to the base of the airlock stairs looked like extremely scruffy mummies, wrapped up from head to toe in thick cloth. Not even fingers or noses were exposed. Law pulled on the pair of dark goggles that hung around his neck and checked to ensure his gloves were tucked under the wrists of his jacket. Satisfied there was no exposed flesh for the sun to attack, he stepped down the small stairway as a tall, reedy figure wearing a patchwork of old military uniforms stepped forward to meet him.

"Xavier," Law said.

Xavier nodded and looked past him at the towering SCEV. His eyes were unreadable behind his goggles, and after a moment, he pointed them back at Law.

"Will you go after them?"

"Yes," Law said simply.

Xavier looked at Law for a long moment. When he spoke, he kept his voice low. "I don't mean to challenge you ..."

"Then don't," Law snapped. Xavier flinched slightly and stepped back. Law reconsidered his attitude an instant later and sighed wearily. "Speak your mind, Xavier."

Xavier swallowed, the action clearly visible behind the scarf he wore over his face and the hood covering his head. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why chase them?"

Law snorted. "You *know* why, Xavier. No one outside the family is to be trusted. We've met outsiders before, and they've always tried to take what we have—murderers, all of them, half out of their minds, looking only to kill and steal and destroy anything that's decent."

"They didn't," Xavier said softly.

"What?"

Xavier hesitated for a long moment. He was old now, but he was still a good soldier, and had served capably as Law's second-in-command for quite some time. Even though he still had to be punished on occasion—everyone in the family had to be disciplined from time to time, and Law was hardly stingy when it came to inflicting pain—Xavier had studiously avoided doing anything that might upset Law. But as he grew older, Law had sensed a change in Xavier. While he had no desire to experience the fields of pain Law could inflict, Law could tell Xavier had reached a decision some time ago to stop living in fear. Law smiled beneath his balaclava. An admirable choice, but the man was still eager to avoid the pain.

"They didn't come to murder us, Law. They came here only for what they needed, things we had no use for." Xavier's voice was level, reasonable. Just the same, the others standing nearby slowly began to back away.

"And what do think will happen if Andrews makes it back to this Harmony Base, Xavier?" Law asked. "He'll report to his superiors, as any good soldier will do, and what if they don't like what they hear? They'll send a force back to destroy us. You know the code we live by, my friend—*trust no one*." He waved at the SCEV looming

over them. "And if they return in more of *these*, or machines capable of even greater destruction, then the family will fall."

"We have no proof they would do such a thing."

"No proof? How many brothers and sisters have we lost, Xavier? Forty? Fifty? That was just from a small detachment of these soldiers. Imagine what will happen when *more* of them arrive!" Law felt the rage boiling up inside of him, that festering fury that was always close at hand, the poisonous anger that his handlers had unknowingly unleashed during their operations. The drugs and selective surgery and the introduction of thousands of tiny, microscopic machines that reorganized his brain had made him at once more than and less of a man. "To them, we're no longer men and women. We're *animals*! That's the mentality of Man, to destroy, to kill. It won't happen this time. I won't let it."

"But, Law—"

"*They destroyed the entire planet!*" Law shouted with such ferocity that he feared he might damage his vocal chords. "Look around you, look at what's *left*. We scramble to survive here while *they* live in comfort, staying hidden for years until they were certain all of *us* had died. How many did they kill, Xavier? Billions! *Billions* of human beings died from that damned war, and now we're next!"

Xavier said nothing. After a time, he nodded slowly and looked down at the ground, his expression hidden beneath layers of protective clothing. Law stared at him, waiting for him to say something. He needed Xavier now more than ever, and he needed to get himself under control before he did something rash, something that couldn't be undone.

Xavier finally looked up. "What are your orders?"

"Take two men inside. Remove all the food and medicine, the bedding, the water, anything the family could use. But be quick about it. I'll need to leave within the hour."

"But how will you find them?" Xavier asked.

"They need to return to their base as quickly as they can, so they'll follow the same route they took to get here," Law said. "Simple, really—I'll catch up to them in the field and deal with them somewhere in the wasteland."

"And what will happen to us?"

Law looked at Xavier for a long moment. "I don't know," he said, finally. "That will be up to you, Xavier. I'm leaving the family under your care. I intend to return, but I don't know if I will. So you should do whatever you need to do to keep the family going. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Law. I understand." There was a mournful quality to his voice that touched Law. He stepped forward and put his hand on Xavier's thin arm. Xavier flinched at the contact, but Law held firm. He put his free hand on Xavier's other arm and pulled him into an embrace. Xavier stiffened, but he didn't resist as Law hugged him powerfully.

"They're yours to tend to, Xavier. I don't think we'll be seeing each other again, so lead them as best as you can. Be what I could never be. Be strong always, but also be what I never was. Compassionate."

"Are you certain this is the only choice we have?"

Law released him and stepped back, motioning to the SCEV. "Get started," he said, then turned and walked up the ramp and into the waiting rig.

**A**S THE SUN descended and slipped past the horizon, SCEV Five made its way across the former state of California, picking its way across the Sierra Nevada mountain range, sticking to roads wherever it could. Day died and night was born, but the rig continued its trek, bumping along through the darkness, unimpeded by the utter blackness thanks to its array of infrared devices. By the next morning, the burly machine had descended from the mountains and accelerated across the mostly flat deserts of Nevada. It then turned on a southerly course, aiming for New Mexico, where it would cut a path across the lowest part of the Rocky Mountains. Once clear of the rugged spires of rock, the SCEV would change course again, this time northeasterly, where she would return directly to Harmony Base.

It would take six days. If all went according to plan, the rig would deliver its precious cargo of replacement supports thirteen days after the Core had gone offline.

Andrews oversaw the SCEV as it sped into the glowing gloom of another night, and he wondered how many more friends might have perished waiting for them to return. As the lights grew dimmer inside the base, as the CO2 scrubbers slowly failed, how many of the people he had known for the last decade had slipped away? None? A dozen? Fifty?

Bathed in the cold glow of the instrument panel, he found he didn't want to contemplate such things. Instead, he urged the SCEV onward, putting his trust in its computer systems to get them back to where they needed to go, to propel the hulking machine on the course they had mapped on their outbound leg.

The cockpit door slid open behind him, and he glanced back as Rachel slipped inside. She handed him a cup, and it was warm to the touch. He regarded it in the glow of the instruments as she settled into the copilot's seat and strapped herself in. She held a cup of her own.

"It's coffee," she told him.

He nodded and reached across the center console so he could squeeze her hand. "You're the bestest, hon." He was happy to have the caffeine. Shifts were longer now that Mulligan was out of commission. Everyone was already dog-tired from the voyage, not to mention the stress of dealing with Law and his people. Now that he had some time and distance separating him from the events in San Jose, Andrews marveled that several hundred people there had managed to survive. From the deformities he had witnessed, he knew Law hadn't been idly boasting when he said the survivors were fertile. Even though Law was obviously a psychotic madman, he had done an incredible job of keeping his people alive over the years, scavenging whatever they needed from the corpse of the shattered metropolis. It was truly a commendable feat.

*Of course, that also included eating other survivors,* he reminded himself. Viewed in that light, Law's accomplishment seemed a little less warm and fuzzy.

"How's Mulligan?" he asked, sipping from his cup. The coffee was hot and bitter, so strong it was almost overpowering—just how he liked it.

"Still out, but it looks like he's in a normal sleep, now. Kelly's keeping an eye on him." She paused and shook her head. "Well, whenever Leona isn't, anyway."

"Come again?"

Rachel looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Babe, you really need to pay more attention. Lee's got the hots for Mulligan."

"Eklund?" Andrews chuckled at the thought. "No way!"

Rachel shrugged and sipped from her own cup. "I can't imagine why, but it sure looks like it."

Andrews didn't know what to make of that—the two most disconnected people in Harmony Base had somehow managed to find one another after practically living on top of each other for years. Well, at least Leona saw something in Mulligan. It remained to be seen if it was a two-way street, especially since Mulligan was twice Eklund's age.

*That ought to be something to see.*

"Anyway, what are you going to tell Benchley about San Jose?" Rachel asked.

"Everything we know. Those ... people back there might not be what we were hoping for, but it's a start. And Law mentioned something about survivalists from the north, so that's something else we'll need to look into—"

A tone sounded suddenly, and the rig began to slow down. Andrews looked at the engineering display as he disconnected the autopilot and took control of the vehicle. He didn't like what he saw—a gear chip warning in the number two differential. The computers had automatically disconnected the faulted system, essentially placing the system in neutral to preserve the complicated array of meshing gears.

"That doesn't look good," Rachel said, looking at the same display.

"No, it's not," Andrews said. "We'll need to shut down and check it out. Without it, we've lost the center set of wheels. They'll still roll, but they won't provide any power, and that's going to screw us up big time."

"We could get stuck," Rachel said.

Andrews nodded, slowing the rig until it came to a halt. "Yeah. And getting stuck out here would be a permanent duty station."

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While they didn't have Spencer's skills to draw from, both Laird and Andrews had enough technical smarts to figure out what had to be done, assisted by the SCEV's electronic system manuals. Rachel was able to pitch in as well; while her forte was not vehicular transmissions, she knew enough about them to be able to assist the two men as they pulled up the floor in the SCEV's center compartment to gain access to the differential. When they opened the case, they found that one gear had been partially stripped. Fishing around through the fluid in the case, they were able to find a few fragments, but were unable to recover all of them.

"It's definitely FUBAR, Mike," Rachel said finally. "I think we can still keep going, but we've got to be careful. Like you said, we get stuck now, it'll be permanent."

Laird regarded the failed gear. "I guess there's no chance of fixing this, huh?"

"Not out here," Rachel said. "We don't have any spares aboard, and I'm not familiar enough with these systems to jury-rig something. If I blow it, we might wind up worse off than we are now."

"You know, I don't think that would take a lot of doing," Laird said. He handed the gear to Andrews, who turned it over in his hand. It was still slick with lubricant, but the metal around the stripped teeth was sharp enough to cut skin. He sighed and wrapped a paper towel around the warm circle of alloy and placed it in a drawer by the engineering station.

"All right, let's button it up and get moving," he said.

"How much will this slow us up?" Kelly asked.

Andrews sighed. "Well, we're not going to be able to cruise as fast as we might, and we have to be damned careful about where we put the wheels. Getting stuck out here, especially in the mountains, would be a total bag of day old dicks. We'll have to be on our toes for the entire trip, and that means we'll have to take it slow."

"Mike, Harmony doesn't have a lot of time left." Leona looked at him with a grim expression that had nothing to do with the painful injury to her leg. Even under the numbing effects of the oxycodone Kelly had given her, she was still alert enough to understand the risks of arriving late.

"I know that, Lee," he said.

"You guys are all tired," she said, looking around the compartment. "Mulligan's still out, but I can pitch in and help out."

"Not while you're half in the bag from the pain meds," Laird said as he bent over the opening in the compartment deck. He matched up the seals they had disturbed opening the differential's casing and prepared to seal it up again. His hands were filthy with glistening, gray lubricant.

"I'll stop taking them," Leona said.

"Probably not an awesome idea," Andrews said, looking over Laird at Kelly.

Kelly shrugged. "It's not like she's going to be doing calisthenics, Captain. She'll be in some measure of discomfort, but as long as she takes it easy and doesn't tear open the sutures I put in her, she'll be fine."

"I can deal with it, Mike," Leona said.

"How long ago did you take your last dose?" Andrews asked.

Leona looked down. "Just before we came to a stop," she said, which meant a little over an hour ago.

He looked at Kelly. "How long until it gets processed by her system?"

"Six hours, to be safe. It does tend to make her a bit loopy, but that's an expected side effect for some patients. We can substitute it with acetaminophen, which won't be as effective at managing the pain, but there shouldn't be any side effects that could impair her performance."

"A little bit of the lightfighter candy all right by you, Lee?"

Leona nodded.

“All right. Go hit one of the racks, and we’ll see about bringing you up front in about six hours,” Andrews said.

“Hooah,” Leona responded, and she slowly limped to the rig’s third compartment. Andrews caught a glimpse of Mulligan lying in one of the lowermost bunks, wrapped up in a blanket. Half of his face was covered by an angry mass of black and purple bruises.

He picked up a torque wrench and bent over the differential casing as Laird fitted it back together.

*The woman's face is still mostly smooth. The only signs of her true age are an array of laugh lines that crinkle whenever she smiles, which she does quite a bit, finding something humorous in almost every situation. Her hair is a tawny blond, its rich color diminished somewhat by the encroaching grays, the ones she's just not vain enough to try to hide behind the quick fixes of bottled hair products. The woman—and more importantly, the man who adores her—knows that youth and vitality are more about what's on the inside than what's on the outside. The interior is what's important, and only a precious few intimates get to see that. The exterior? Hell, everyone else on the planet can see that, free of charge.*

*The girls look like both of them, a mix of her fair skin and honey-colored hair, but with his eyes and nose. He thinks the nose looks much better on them than on him. It confers an impression of quiet, regal strength that makes him wonder how they'll fare in the coming years when boys begin to circle around them. Would they take the males on head-to-head as he would, or would they instead use the mother's good nature and occasional guile? He finds he almost can't wait to find out, but he knows these things will happen sooner than he'll want. It's not going to be easy watching them winnow away the list of suitors until they find the right ones. And when that happens, they won't be his little girls any longer.*

*He pulls open the screen door on the small house they leased on the plains of Kansas, where the land is flat and seems to go on forever, broken only occasionally by trees or telephone poles that stand a silent vigil in the heat of the midday sun. From somewhere in the humid, sticky distance, a crow caws, and he feels a momentary portent of dread flutter across his heart. But why? The day is perfect, the weather calm, and his family waits for him only a few steps away in the small kitchen. He enters the room, and the girls shriek with delight as they leap toward him with no hesitation, even though he's been gone for so many years of their lives that he sometimes feels he barely knows them. His wife's smile is broad and welcoming, and her dark eyes twinkle as she turns from the kitchen counter, forgetting about the lunch she had been about to serve.*

*"Well, it's about time, stranger!" she says, laughing, her voice bright and clear.*

*Behind him, the crow caws again.*

*The day explodes into bright white light that washes out all the color, turning everything into a hodgepodge of blacks, grays, whites. His daughters shriek, cowering before the brilliant, overpowering flare that scorches their retinas, decimating their vision in an instant. His wife staggers backward, the smile finally wiped from her face as her own eyes are immolated. She crashes against the counter, reaching out with both hands to steady herself.*



*From behind, a rumble draws near. He likens it to the roar of a subway train closing in on a station, pushing a gust of hot air through the tunnel as it advances. He senses death closing on him, something he's felt before, but this time it approaches with such surety that he knows there is no warding it off. No tricks to play to sidestep it, no weapon to defeat it, no training to help him prepare. He knows what's coming, and he knows his might is as insignificant against it as a drop of water holding back the desert.*

*The shockwave rolls over him, through him, and slams into the house with such force that the structure buckles immediately. The wave of superheated compressed air brings something else with it—burning, potent radiation that causes the house and those inside it to explode in flame. The girls' screams rise to a tortured keening that is impossibly loud in his ears, then his wife shrieks as well as her clothes disintegrate and her skin reddens and chars before the blistering onslaught. The shockwave does its work, tearing the house away from him before he can take another step, ripping his family away from him as the prairie catches alight—*

Mulligan snapped to full consciousness, the ragged scream caught in his throat. The transition from the white-hot world of his nightmare to the semi-darkness of the SCEV's sleeping compartment jarred him, kept him mentally off-balance as he rocked from side to side in the slightly scooped bunk. He turned his head and found his neck was stiff, the tendons and muscles protesting the sudden action. His entire body was sore, essentially one giant ache. He saw a figure sleeping in the bunk across from him, and he recognized it as Jim Laird, his snores barely audible over the whining drone of the SCEV's turbine engines and the creaks and rattles of the rig as it bumped across the landscape. Mulligan slowly swung his legs over the side of the bunk and sat up, his movements sluggish. He sensed more than saw other figures in the compartment's tepid light—Choi, sleeping in the bunk above Laird, and Kelly Jordello, snoozing away in the bunk above his. Kelly murmured something in her sleep and rolled over, but other than that, none of them gave any indication that they had heard the strangled cry that he had tamped down on an instant before it became a full-throated scream.

Mulligan buried his face in hands and softly wept.

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Leona looked up from her work at the Command Intelligence Station when the aft shield door opened and a disheveled Mulligan stepped into the second compartment. He looked like hell—bruised and battered, eyes bloodshot. He blinked against the compartment's bright light as he closed the door and moved toward the kitchenette, holding onto the padded rails mounted to the compartment's overhead. Leona smiled at him wryly, but if he saw it, Mulligan ignored her.

*Fat chance of that, big guy.*

"Welcome back to the world of the living, Sarmajor," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Like a rubber-billed woodpecker who's spent two weeks trying to peck his way through a petrified forest. How long was I out?" Mulligan reached into a cabinet and removed a mug, then slid it into the coffee machine bolted to one wall. He closed the

metal fiddle rails around the mug so it wouldn't go flying as the SCEV trundled across broken ground. He stabbed the brew button on the coffee maker, and a second later, the scent of fresh coffee wafted through the air.

"Two and half days. We just came out of the Rockies a few hours ago," Leona told him.

He looked shocked. "Two and a half *days*?"

Leona smiled and shrugged. "Hey, you're not a young buck anymore, Mulligan."

Mulligan scowled and took his mug over to the dinette a few feet away. He slowly lowered himself into its confines, wincing in discomfort. Leona rose from her chair and hobbled over to him, grabbing onto one of his beefy arms with one hand while holding onto the overhead rail with the other. Mulligan's scowl deepened, and he pulled his arm away from her.

"I'm good, Lieutenant," he said brusquely. "Thanks for the assist."

Leona smiled and turned to the kitchenette at her back. She pulled out a bottle of water from the refrigerator and slid into the dinette across from him. "No problem. Mind if I join you?"

Mulligan released a world-weary sigh that said he did indeed mind, but he looked too damn beat to fight her. He carefully sipped his coffee instead, and regarded her over the brim of his mug.

"Any signs of pursuit?"

Leona shook her head. "Negative. Looks like you dusted that guy back in San Jose, Sarmajor. Good shooting. None of us would have thought to use a Hellfire in that way."

Mulligan merely grunted at the compliment and sipped more coffee. "Who's up front?"

"Andrews and Andrews."

Mulligan grunted again. "Thought they were going to keep to separate shifts."

"You and I were out of rotation, but I'm due to go take the right seat so Captain Andrews can knock off. Oh—I have these for you." Leona reached into one of her uniform pockets and pulled out Mulligan's dog tags and the eagle medallion. She fingered the medallion. "Your tags ... and this other thing. Where'd you get it? It's lovely."

Mulligan's bloodshot eyes bugged out when he saw the necklace. He held out one hand, palm up. "What in the hell are you doing with that?" he asked, his voice suddenly tight and constricted.

Leona frowned as she handed the necklace over to him. "I didn't want you strangling on them while you *slept*, Sergeant Major." Her voice was a frosty counterpoint to his.

Mulligan regarded the necklace for an instant, and she saw all of his attention was on the medallion. He looked up at her and nodded curtly. "Thanks for the thought."

Leona said nothing, just stared at the older man openly as he slipped on the necklace and hid it beneath his uniform blouse. *What the hell is it that I see in this guy? Father figure? Protector? Relic? What?*

"What the hell are you looking at, Eklund?" Mulligan asked with a sudden ferocity that surprised her. She found herself recoiling at the barbs in his voice, and that

pissed her off, though more at herself than at him.

"Nothing much, evidently," she managed to say.

Mulligan scowled and gulped some coffee, shifting on the dinette's faux leather wraparound couch. Something crinkled beneath him, and he reached down and pulled out an old comic book. A copy of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, one of Tony Choi's most treasured possessions—the kid had brought them into the base when he'd moved in with his family, and he carried them everywhere. Mulligan snorted derisively when he saw it.

"One of Choi's Asian encyclopedias, I see," he said, dropping it to the table as he took another swig. He regarded the cover for a long moment, then started trying to smooth out its creases. Why would he care about an old comic book, especially one that didn't even belong to him?

*Because it's from before, she told herself. It's like him. A relic.*

"What were you like before the war, Mulligan?" she asked suddenly.

Mulligan leafed through the comic book, keeping his eyes rooted on the somewhat faded but still colorful pages between its covers. She knew her question hit him wrong and pushed him into a space he didn't want to be in, and it was a funny sight watching the hard-bitten Special Forces trooper hide behind a slim edition of *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

"Lieutenant, I'm seriously in no mood for a game of Twenty Questions right now," he said, his voice surprisingly even.

"I watched you while you were out, Mulligan. You were having dreams. Nightmares. Things that seemed to terrify you." She paused to sip from her water. "That guy back in San Jose. Law. He did the same to me, the same thing your nightmares do to you. Break down the wall we've been hiding behind. Made me see things I never even wanted to think about ..."

"Great, we've both been mind-fucked." Mulligan didn't look up from the comic. "You think that means we're finally soul mates or something? Forget it, kid."

"You were crying. Why?"

Mulligan tossed the comic book onto the table and hauled himself off the dinette couch. If he felt any pain from the movement, it didn't register on his face as he got to his feet and drained the remains of his coffee mug, then turned and put the empty vessel in the steel sink. Leona rose as well. She knew that pursuing Mulligan like this was akin to cornering a wounded grizzly bear, but she didn't care. She was aware that of all people, she was incredibly ill-equipped to deal with a man like Mulligan, but she instinctively knew that to understand the man's pain was to know him, to glimpse his soul as it flitted between light and shadow.

"You lost your family in the war, didn't you?"

Mulligan froze for an instant, and Leona could almost see something flip inside of him like a circuit breaker. Mulligan whirled upon her like some thundering war god and seized her arms in his big hands. He swung her around as if she were a doll and pinned her against the padded side of the airlock, causing her to gasp in a queer mixture of fear and something bordering on delight. She'd found what made Mulligan tick, or at least found the path to it, but as she saw the uncontained fury break across

his face, she suddenly wondered if she might take the discovery to her rapidly approaching grave.

"Yes, they died in the war, along with six billion other people!" Mulligan snarled, and his voice was as tight as a well-tuned snare drum. "And guess what, Eklund? After the missiles dropped, they were still alive for almost four hours! They were in Scott City, some little hick town that was only thirty minutes from Harmony, and I couldn't get to them because of my own *recklessness!*"

Leona writhed in his powerful grip, feeling his thick fingers dig into the flesh and muscle of her upper arms, but there was no escaping the towering man's grip. She would have bruises—if she survived the encounter. Mulligan's eyes were wild, filled with a mixture of pain and rage and despair that had festered unchecked in him for a decade, and even she knew such a combination was as volatile as unstable nitroglycerin.

Suddenly, Mulligan released her and stepped back, his fingers curled into fists, his feet spread wide apart against the swaying of the vehicle. He glared down at her, his chest rising and falling as he took in great deep, ragged breaths.

"Get what you wanted, Lieutenant?" he asked finally, his voice barely audible over the sounds of the rig's passage. "Any other action news updates I can provide, now that we're finally having that warm heart-to-heart you've been after?"

"Don't you ever touch me again," she said. She tried to put steel in her voice, but it sounded pathetic and weak after his fury.

"Then take the hint, girlie—stay the hell away from me."

He turned and marched past her, heading for the cockpit.

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Andrews and Rachel were in the cockpit. The day beyond the viewports was hardly bright and accommodating—it looked like another storm was beginning to brew, coalescing on the horizon. He glanced down at the instruments, paying special attention to the radar display, which showed a deepening wall of clutter that rose almost twenty thousand feet into the air, and it was climbing.

"Mind if I sit in on the last leg, Captain?" Mulligan asked.

"Mulligan! How do you feel?" Andrews asked, looking up at him from the confines of the left seat.

Rachel stiffened when she heard his voice, but he ignored her. "Like shit, sir, but that's normal."

"Yeah, well, you should be resting. I hear you're recovering from one hell of a concussion," Andrews said, facing forward.

"Concussion, hangover—who can tell the difference, these days?" Mulligan said, trying to adopt a jovial tone and failing miserably.

"I already have Eklund ready to come forward," Andrews said. "You should rest, Sarmajor."

"I've been out for over two days, Captain. I've had more than enough rest, and I'm a hundred percent operational."

Andrews chuckled. "You said that right before you passed out."

"Yeah, well, that was then, this is now. How about it, sir?"

Andrews glanced up at Mulligan again, then down at the instruments. After a moment of consideration, he nodded slowly. "All right, Sarmajor. But if you start feeling messed up, you let me know and Eklund will take over. Understood?"

"Roger that, sir."

"Take the right seat. Just so you know, the number two differential's blown. It shit the bed about two days ago." Andrews nodded again, this time to Rachel. Slowly, hesitantly, she unbuckled her safety harness and pushed back the copilot's seat.

"Can it be fixed?" Mulligan asked, twisting to one side to allow her enough room to leave the cockpit. It hurt like hell, and he could feel Leona Eklund staring daggers into his back. Mulligan came to the wry conclusion that he was caught between two women who probably wanted nothing more than to stab him repeatedly in the heart with dull pencils.

Andrews seemed mostly unaware of his predicament, though he did watch Rachel with a casual expression. "Negative, it's completely fragged—can't be repaired without a lift and a hardstand. It's put us another seventeen hours behind schedule." He nodded out the viewports. "And there's another treat: a storm building up to the east. Eklund says it's a big one."

Rachel pushed past Mulligan, her eyes downcast. He released a small sigh. At least she didn't make a dramatic exit, which meant she was either extremely exhausted or her husband had spoken some words of wisdom that she'd taken to heart. Either way, Mulligan was happy to ease himself into the copilot's seat and close the shield door.

"Well, I can tell you one thing, Captain. This mission wasn't a bore."

Andrews rubbed his bristly chin with one hand and nodded. "I'll give you that, Sergeant Major." He studied the instruments and made a small noise in his throat. "That storm's coalescing pretty quickly. The front goes right off the scope."

Mulligan checked the rig's position on the moving map display, and he was surprised to discover just how close they were to Harmony Base. "We're not that far from the signal repeaters. We should have voice contact with the base pretty soon, assuming they have enough power to transmit. No sign of pursuit from California, right?"

"Negative," Andrews said.

Mulligan put some confidence into his voice. "Then we're almost there. We'll make it home without a hitch, Captain. Maybe we should switch on the transponder, so the base'll know we're coming. Just in case we can't make voice contact."

"Good idea," Andrews said, and he pressed a button on the panel before him. "You a man of faith, Sarmajor?"

Mulligan bit back his immediate reply and took a moment to actually consider the question. "I don't know about faith, sir. But the odds look good."

Andrews nodded. After a moment, he looked over at Mulligan, studying him as the enlisted man looked out the viewports. Mulligan watched him from the corner of his eye, wondering why the hell everyone found him so interesting as of late.

"Thanks for coming back for us, Sarmajor," Andrews said finally. He turned forward and monitored the rig's progress as it traveled on under the guidance of the autopilot.

“And I’m sorry we didn’t at least try and return the favor.”

Mulligan was surprised by the sudden sentiment, but he didn’t let it show. Besides, his face was so battered that adopting a surprised look would probably hurt like hell. “Forget it, sir. If I had any sense at all, I would’ve died back there. You had five people to take care of, and a mission to complete. If I’d been in your boots, I would have made tracks, too.” He paused for a moment. “Besides, life hasn’t been a barrel of laughs, lately. Dying’s nothing I’m afraid of, believe me.”

“Maybe you ought to alter your outlook a bit? You’re still alive, and some folks care —”

“Yeah, sir, thanks a lot, but let’s not go there, okay? We’re still on an ongoing mission, so let’s keep our minds focused on that.” He faced Andrews directly. “Okay, sir?”

Andrews met Mulligan’s gaze evenly and held it. “Roger that. But I want to tell you something, Mulligan. I was wrong about you. Having you on the roster wasn’t such a bad idea, after all.”

Mulligan snorted. “Who’re *you* trying to kid? Letting Benchley talk me onto this rig was the biggest mistake I’ve made in years. I’m way too old for the Iron Man act. I should’ve stayed in the dark with everyone else.” Almost against his will, Mulligan was surprised to add, “But, uh ... thanks anyway, sir.”

Andrews nodded and turned away, apparently satisfied with Mulligan’s response. Mulligan busied himself by running some diagnostics on the rig’s drivetrain components, hoping that if he looked busy enough, Andrews wouldn’t be tempted to make any more maudlin chitchat.

LAW EXAMINED THE growing storm with some trepidation, watching as it billowed and grew on the horizon. While the SCEV had handled itself admirably—it even continued rolling along its course when Law had, very much against his will, fallen asleep in the pilot’s seat—the storm front was simply gigantic, stretching from horizon to horizon ... and it was still over fifty miles away. Great flashes of lightning illuminated the pulsating formation’s innards, and a wall of wind—a gust front, he remembered from his earlier days—had already swept over the SCEV, sending clouds of dust flying across the vehicle’s viewports. To say the tempest was intimidating was a massive understatement.

*Will this be the end?* he wondered. *Will this storm destroy the vehicle, or just give Andrews enough cover to return to this base of his?*

*Either way, I’m dead.*

Law had not taken the time to stop at any of the caches on the way back to Harmony Base, so the SCEV was critically low on fuel. He had only a couple of hundred miles left, then the rig would be reduced to battery power. After that, he would have—according to the computer display in front of him—another thirty hours of power before the SCEV became inoperable. Given the rather toxic environment outside the vehicle, it was obvious he wouldn’t survive for long after that happened.

There had been no sign of his quarry. Had Andrews and his remaining crew taken another route? Had they been delayed somewhere in their travels, and he had passed them by in the darkness? Had he been wrong in assuming that his lightened rig would be able to catch up to Andrews’s heavier one? Had they deviated from their course to take on more fuel at one of the caches?

He just didn’t know.

*But I’m close.* He regarded the moving map display. Harmony Base was only a hundred or so miles to the east, buried beneath the gently rolling landscape of dry earth and desiccated grass and the occasional twisted, rotting tree. *I’m close, so even if I get there ahead of them, I can simply wait for them.* He judged that he could extend his survival by several days if he shut down the rig and conserved fuel and power, laying in wait for his prey. The interferometers positioned along the rig’s exterior shell—basically a series of antennae designed to receive electromagnetic pulses along certain spectra—would alert him to SCEV Five’s approach, presuming Andrews was running with the ground-search radar enabled. And why wouldn’t he? There was no reason for him to disable it. Even if he was operating it at minimal power, as Law was doing, the SCEV’s receivers would detect the pulses of millimeter-wave radar energy long before Andrews and the others could get a solid return that showed his location. While in the Marine Corps a lifetime ago, when the planet was still green and fertile, Law had learned that radar energy was detectable far beyond

the range of its own receiver, which was one reason that pilots and warships had practiced emissions control, limiting their use of technologies that could give away their location before they were ready to engage the enemy. Perhaps he could use that to his advantage—

A chime sounded over the cockpit speakers and, for a moment, Law was overcome by terror. Had Andrews found him? Was his vehicle being targeted by another rig, hidden somewhere out on the landscape?

He scanned the displays and saw he had been given a remarkable gift. SCEV Five's transponder had been activated, and it emitted a string of data.

Including the rig's position, just seventeen short miles ahead of him.

Law almost laughed out loud. The other vehicle was moving at less than forty miles per hour, which meant he would catch up to it in less than sixty minutes. He reached for the map display and zoomed out, examining the surrounding terrain. There was a small line of ridges that stood above the plain twenty-five miles ahead. If he could get to them in time, they would provide Law a clear view of the area, and he would be able to look down on SCEV Five as it rolled past.

Law dropped a waypoint onto the ridged area by dragging a finger across the map display's touch screen, and the SCEV obediently altered its course.

*Soon, Andrews. Soon.*

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As they closed to within fifty miles of Harmony Base, Andrews slipped on his radio headset, switched one of the radios over to the approach frequency, and pressed down on the TRANSMIT button on the control column. "Harmony Base, this is SCEV Five. Over." He released the button and heard nothing but static-tinged emptiness crackling across his earphones. He tried again. "Harmony Base, this is SCEV Five. We're inbound to you now. Can you give us a SITREP? Over."

A faint voice came through the static interference, vague but distinct. "SCEV Five, Harmony Base. Stand by for Harmony Six. Over."

"Roger that, Harmony. Over." Andrews looked over at Mulligan. "Well, we get to talk to the Old Man himself."

"The wonders of modern communications technology never cease to amaze me, sir," Mulligan said. He donned his own headset and adjusted the boom microphone. "I hope he picks up soon. We're going to lose commo once that storm hits."

A low whine came across the radio as Benchley spoke, his voice barely audible above the background noise.

"SCEV Five, this is Harmony Six. SITREP. Over."

"Harmony Six, this is SCEV Five. We have three supports. One soul and one rig lost. Number two differential is gone, but all other systems are green. ETA in just over one hour, but we're on a storm run. Is there any way you can boost your signal output? We can barely read you. Over."

Lightning flared in the storm, and the radios were awash with static. Benchley responded, but Andrews couldn't make out the words.

"Harmony Six, negative contact. Over."



Again, Benchley's voice came across the radio, horribly distorted and drowned out by the rising tide of white noise. Andrews repeated his situation report and again reported negative contact, hoping that those in Harmony Base might be able to hear it.

Mulligan stirred in the copilot's seat. "We should still be able to establish voice contact at this range," he said. "They must've burned through the auxiliary power faster than they thought."

"Damn," Andrews said. He had an ominous vision of a darkened Harmony Base, the air stale and filled with the stench of sweat and untreated waste, the personnel inside the subterranean fortress fighting to draw enough oxygen from the carbon dioxide-saturated air. Had more people died? Would even more die over the next hour?

Could they even send the vehicle lift to the surface to retrieve them?

"Transmit our status over the data link," he told Mulligan. "Ask them to raise the lift, so we can at least make it that far."

Mulligan's fingers flew over the instrument panel as he executed the captain's command. "Done."

Andrews pressed the button that opened the pressure door separating the cockpit from the second compartment. "Leona, you still back there?"

She appeared at the doorway a moment later. "You want me to come forward?" she asked, glancing over at Mulligan.

"Negative—we're close enough to Harmony that we'll keep the staffing as it is right now. Get everyone else up and ready. We've got about a hundred clicks to go, and that storm is going to be on the doorstep by the time we get there. Let me know when everyone's awake and strapped in. We've got to move a little faster."

"Roger that." She looked at Mulligan again. The big NCO ignored her, but there was some tension there. Andrews found himself wondering what was up between them.

*Later*, he told himself as Leona withdrew. Andrews sealed the pressure door again and peered through the viewports. Dust was blowing across the dead fields, driven by the storm's gust front. It wasn't heavy enough to vastly reduce visibility, but that was coming. By the time they made it to Harmony, they'd be half-blind despite the radar, infrared, and the rig's rather impressive array of floodlights.

"We're good to go back here," Leona said over the intercom a few minutes later. "Everyone's strapped down. Open her up."

"Cool. Thanks," Andrews replied. He switched off the autopilot and pushed the control column forward. The SCEV accelerated, picking up speed until it was dashing across the landscape at almost fifty miles per hour. He had to slow when it rolled up to a series of ridges, but he stuck to the narrow defiles between them, using them as avenues to shield the rig from the mounting wind. It took only a few minutes, then they were back on the plain. Andrews pushed the control column forward again, coaxing the big rig into an all-out sprint across the more-or-less flat terrain. Even with the rig's sturdy suspension, the ride was hardly a comfortable one.

A series of loud *bangs* cut through the air. Andrews swept his gaze across the instrument panel and reduced power, thinking the machine's drivetrain was

experiencing another failure. But the combined moving map and radar display froze up, and a single message flashed across the screen: SYSTEM INOP: HARDWARE FAILURE.

He was trying to process what had happened when he felt the control column move forward with such intensity that it was almost ripped from his grasp. Mulligan had slammed the copilot's control column full forward, until it literally banged against the control stop.

"We're taking fire!" he snapped.

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*It couldn't be more perfect.*

Law positioned the SCEV atop one of the ridges that overlooked the plain and eased it slightly downslope, where he hoped the miniguns would have a full field of fire. Just to be sure, he slewed them from side to side once he had set the SCEV's brakes, then checked elevation and depression. Both weapons would be able to engage SCEV Five, which approached Law's position from the southwest. Thanks to godsend of transponder technology, he was able to monitor his enemy's progress across the wasteland without needing to resort to the millimeter-wave radar system to paint the target. That would only serve to alert Andrews and his crew, and Law was in no mood to sacrifice surprise just yet. While the SCEV carried several thousand rounds of tungsten-cored 7.62 millimeter bullets, he knew they would be mostly ineffective against the SCEV's armored hide. In fact, they couldn't even reliably defeat the rig's tires, which were constructed out of a self-sealing honeycombed polymer. But the radome on top of the vehicle wasn't armored at all, beyond a fiberglass shell that was transparent to radar. Beneath the shell lay the radar scanner itself. Law knew if he damaged that, he would also take out the vehicle's anti-missile defenses, which the helpful electronic manuals he had read during his voyage informed him required a radar contact to act against. With both the radar and AMW system down, Law could target Andrews's SCEV with a Hellfire missile. Since the weapon was designed to destroy even densely armored main battle tanks, SCEV Five would be easy prey.

*All too easy.*

There was no indication that Andrews and the rest of the crew aboard SCEV Five had seen him as he dashed past them, his vehicle a vague phantom in the storm-blown dust that swirled over the plain. He had come within five hundred meters from SCEV Five, and he had caught momentary glimpses of it through the roiling dust. It was moving much slower than his own vehicle. Was that because Andrews was being conservative in their approach, or was the vehicle damaged? Was there something about the local topology that necessitated a more deliberate speed? Law found nothing unusual in the vehicle's electronic navigation system, and it had updated itself during the outbound voyage from Harmony Base. By the time he had reached the top of the highest ridge, he knew he had nothing to fear. The speed of SCEV Five was nothing of importance; he would simply have to wait in his ambush for several extra minutes until the target drew past.

There it was.

SCEV Five emerged onto the flat plain below, no more than eighty yards to the right of the ridge Law's vehicle sat on. He had only seconds to act before the other rig's radar detected his vehicle amidst the clutter of the ridgeline—the hard, metal shape of SCEV Four would be difficult to conceal in such an elevated position. But he had prepared himself for quick action, and the miniguns on the rig's nose were capable of being aimed and fired optically, so he merely slewed the turreted weapons to the right, laid the electronically-generated crosshairs across SCEV Five's form, allowed the computer to correct for windage, and fired. Two muted columns of flame erupted from the rig's nose as the electrically driven miniguns unleashed their salvo of rounds, and SCEV Five was suddenly besieged by a hail of muted sparks as the bullets struck it at a quartering angle. Law fired the rounds across the top of the vehicle's MEP, where the radome was located, and he was rewarded by the sight of fiberglass exploding into shards that whirled through the air, before the wind caught them and sent them fluttering off to the west. For an instant, he caught a glimpse of the radome's interior parts, including the millimeter-wave scanner array. Then it too disintegrated as several rounds smashed through it, shattering sensitive electronics, before the SCEV began executing a series of clumsy evasive gyrations. More bullets pelted the vehicle, raking across its side and rear. Law ceased fire and tracked the target, then ripped off several more bursts as it accelerated away. The rounds struck the rear of the rig, but other than shearing off an antenna, denting some metal, and tearing away a coating of slick paint, they did nothing more than further mar the already dirty vehicle's appearance. Law secured the miniguns and went for the missiles. He raised the pod and switched SCEV Four's own radar array into targeting mode, his fingers dancing over the fire control system, then across the display he had dedicated for the purpose of engaging SCEV Five with the Hellfire missile system. The radar locked onto SCEV Five's fleeing figure instantly, but he was surprised to discover he couldn't fire on the vehicle—the firing button on the display was grayed out. He tried the physical button on the control yoke, but the results were the same: no missile would launch. He understood the problem quickly. The fire control computer had image recognition capability, and it had automatically refused to fire on an SCEV until Law cleared the warning message flashing on the touch screen display. He did so, and the firing button became active again. Law pressed the button and was rewarded with a chime indicating positive launch. A brief *hiss* sounded as the missile left the launch rails and arced toward SCEV Five.

*All too easy*, Law thought again.

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Andrews silenced the blaring alarms, content to allow Mulligan to do whatever he needed to keep the vehicle from being hit again. He thumbed through the engineering display and found the radar was, in fact, quite dead; there were warnings that said the dome was unlatched, but he knew that wasn't the case. It had been destroyed by a hail of steel rain. More importantly, the sensitive components inside it had met a similar fate. More bullets raked across the SCEV's back, making scattered pinging noises as they ricocheted off the rig's armored hide. Andrews put the AMW system

under manual control; without the radar, they wouldn't deploy automatically. They could still be fired from the cockpit, just without the extreme precision of a radar launch.

"Stand ready on those things," Mulligan said. "If your friend lobs a missile at us, it's the only system we've got that's going to matter. Can't be sure that chaff will work very well in this wind."

Andrews grunted, then spoke into his headset microphone. "Harmony Base, SCEV Five—we're taking fire, rig status coming your way now! Over!" As he spoke, he transmitted the SCEV's engineering condition to the base. There was no response, of course, as the storm's static discharges were interfering with the communications, filling the frequencies with ululating bursts of white noise. He hoped the data burst would make it through, but there was no guarantee of that, either. He set the system to rebroadcast the rig's status every two seconds, in the hope that one of the data bursts would make it through.

Another alarm sounded, one that Andrews had only heard in training: one of the IR receivers mounted on the rig's hull had detected a sudden heat bloom, which meant a missile had been launched. The tactical display indicated the shot had originated approximately three hundred meters behind and to the left; he immediately deployed two bursts of chaff, waited a half-second, then popped off one of the anti-missile warheads. The unit leapt out of its niche and, a moment later, a dull explosion could be heard somewhere to the rear of the rig. Andrews held his breath for a couple of seconds, then released it in a rush. They were still alive. A Hellfire would have caught them by now if it hadn't been destroyed by the AMW or lost its radar lock from the chaff.

*Can it reacquire us in this?*

He hoped the obscuration generated by the storm would work to their advantage. He knew the radar-seeker in each Hellfire's nose would energize upon breaking target lock, and that the weapon would climb to reacquire the rig with its own internal millimeter-wave system.

Apparently not. Another alarm sounded, indicating a second launch. Andrews repeated the procedure, feeling a cold, clammy sweat break out across his forehead and scalp as his heart pounded in his chest. Mulligan muttered a curse, working the control column and sending the rig into a series of violent gyrations. There was another distant *thud* as the AMW exploded, but Andrews kept pumping out the chaff anyway as the radar warning receiver continued to trill its song. Mulligan cranked the rig hard to the left, almost seeming to turn it in the middle of the plain—

The world seemed to explode right outside the viewport beside Mulligan, and the rig lurched in an odd way, rising up on its left tires as something slammed into it. The horizon rolled, and the thunderous cacophony of screeching metal and shattering plastics filled the air. The displays flickered, and the master caution warning alert blared as Andrews reached for the control column on his side and pulled it hard to the right, only to find it was already contacting the control stop.

*"Fuck!"*

The SCEV rolled over onto its side and, victim of its own momentum, continued rolling until it skidded across the plain on its back, the view through the viewports

dimming as earth and a cloud of dust washed across them, turning almost black.

**T**HE WORLD HAD turned upside down, and Andrews couldn't quite make sense of it.

The cockpit was mostly dark, illuminated only by glowing warning annunciators and the anemic flickering of LED displays. Something kept going *beep-beep-beep* with a metronomic regularity, but Andrews couldn't figure out what it was. He felt confused and disoriented, and there was a growing pressure in his head. The straps over his shoulders felt incredibly tight, as if the gravity reels had attempted to retract the entire harness, pulling him against the seatback. He blinked in the semi-darkness; all he could hear above the beeping alarm was the *tick* and *pop* of cooling metal and electronics. Outside, the wind howled, loud enough to be heard through the rig's thick hide.

The wind blew away a coating of dust on one corner of the viewport, and Andrews knew that the world was actually right side up. It was the SCEV that was upside down.

*Oh, fuck ... we're on our back!*

"Come on, Andrews!"

Andrews saw movement beside him, and he looked over to see Mulligan brace himself against the cockpit overhead before he hit his harness's quick release. He tumbled out of his seat and sprawled across the overhead, the weight of his body snapping off several plastic switches on the panel. He squirmed around on the panel until he was able to sit upright, and he looked at Andrews hanging down beside him like some ridiculous giant bat.

"Captain, are you hurt?" he asked.

Andrews considered the question, and decided he felt mostly fine. He shook his head. "I'm good."

"Then let's get the fuck out of here, sir. We've got battery power available, but that's it."

"What happened?" Andrews put a hand on the overhead—now below him—as Mulligan had done, and released his harness. He half-fell out of his seat, braced by his arm and his legs slamming into the bottom of the instrument panel. That hurt.

"Must've been a near-hit by that last missile," Mulligan said. "I guess it broke lock, reacquired it, but couldn't maneuver fast enough to put steel right on target. Must've hit the deck right next to us as I was turning, and the blast flipped us over." Mulligan regarded the instrument panel, then flipped a switch to shut off the beeping alarm. "We're not going any further in this crate, unless you happen to have a Triple A membership."

Andrews extricated himself from beneath the instrument panel. "What are you talking about?"

"Never mind," Mulligan said dryly, pulling open the pressure door. It squealed in its track, then stopped suddenly when it was only halfway open. Mulligan tugged on it

with both hands and wrenched it open a few inches at a time, until there was enough space for the two men to slide into the next compartment.

The lounge compartment was a mess. Lockers had burst open, spilling their contents. The rest of the SCEV crew lay on what once was previously the overhead. Laird and Leona lay in a bleeding, twisted heap just outside the cockpit door. Andrews reached for them and gently began to pull them apart.

"Jim? Lee? You guys all right?"

"I think so," Leona said, blinking in the dim emergency lighting. She seemed dazed and unfocused.

Laird was anything but, and he shoved her in the shoulder. "Then get the hell off of me!"

Andrews found there was enough room to stand, so he got to his feet and picked his way past the pair as they unwound themselves with Mulligan's help. Across from the dining settee, Rachel and Choi tended to Kelly, who lay quite still. The precious core supports sat next to her, having exploded out of their locker and shattering the dining table in the process as they hurtled from one side of the SCEV to the other. Andrews picked his way to Rachel's side and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Babe? You okay?"

She nodded and glanced over her shoulder, looking up at him for a moment before turning back to Kelly. "I'm good, but one of the core supports tagged Kelly in the leg. I think it's a bad break."

"Christ. Can she be moved?"

Rachel watched as Choi gingerly felt along one of Kelly's legs. Andrews noticed it was bent at an unnatural angle near the base of her thigh, the flesh there hard and mostly unyielding beneath Choi's probing fingers. Choi looked up at Andrews, his usually affable features marred by concern.

"I don't know about that, sir. This looks *severely* messed up," he said.

"Make a hole, make it wide," Mulligan snapped. Andrews stepped aside as far as he could, and Mulligan squeezed in beside Rachel. He knelt next to Kelly and examined her injured leg, and none too gently. "Choi, you have knife?"

"Yeah." Choi reached around and pulled a folding knife from his pocket, opened it, and handed it to Mulligan. The sergeant major cut open her uniform over the injury site and ripped it open, baring her entire leg. Choi started to remove her boot, but Mulligan stopped him with a wave. He turned the knife back to Choi and continued exploring the wound. Sure enough, there was an angry red impact site on her leg, just above the knee, and it was swelling considerably. Mulligan shook his head with a sigh.

"It's a closed break, so that's better than her bleeding out. We'll need to get a splint on her right now, and have something ready for the pain if she comes to. If we take it easy, she'll be okay." Mulligan turned and looked back at Leona as she pulled herself upright, wincing at the pain in her own leg. "Lieutenant Eklund, you're a medical officer ... What do you think, codeine?"

Leona nodded. "Choi, there should be some injectable codeine phosphate in the medical locker behind you." The locker's door was bent inward, probably from one of the core supports crashing into it. "If you can get it open, I'll give her a dose right now.

The vacuum splints are there, as well, in red bags. Pull out a medium unit and the pump.”

“I’ll treat her, Lieutenant,” Mulligan said. “I’ve done this sort of thing before, and the codeine’s an intramuscular injection, so that’s easy. Just tell me what dosage to administer.”

“Sixty milligrams should be enough for the next few hours, Sergeant Major,” Leona said. Her voice was curiously brittle, but if Mulligan picked up on it, he didn’t show it.

“So what else did they teach you at Fort Bragg, Sarmajor?” Andrews asked.

“A little of this, a little of that. You want to see something really special, remind me to whip up some of my famous five-alarm chili. It killed a Texan once.” He looked up as Choi yanked open the medical locker and pawed through the disorganized contents. He found the splint first, then the small bottle of pain medication. He handed them over to Mulligan, who looked at Choi expectantly.

“I need a hypodermic, dumbass,” he said finally.

“Oh. Sorry.” Choi turned back to the medical locker, rummaged through it a little more gently this time, and pulled out a plastic of individually wrapped hypodermics. Mulligan filled one with the prescribed medication.

“Mike, what the hell happened?” Laird asked. “Did we actually take fire out here?”

Andrews nodded. “Affirmative. Looks like Law and some of his pals are still in possession of my rig. The bastard must’ve been chasing us across half the country, then split off and set up an ambush when he caught up to us.”

Laird’s eyes widened. “But we’ve been averaging almost a hundred klicks an hour and had a day’s lead time, at least!”

“He must’ve stripped down the rig to increase its speed. Once we lost the differential, it was only a matter of time until he caught up to us—he just had to follow the e-nav. He’s still out there, too. We can’t stay here.”

Leona frowned. “Mike, there’s a storm front moving in. Even in full gear, the sievert count’ll be high enough to kill us!”

“We’re not going to survive in here either,” Andrews said. “We just happen to be the proverbial sitting duck.” He turned to Mulligan. “You’re the survival expert here, Sarmajor. Any tips?”

“Don’t look at me—I’ve used up my quota of miracles on this trip.” Mulligan administered the injection, then capped the used syringe and tossed it into the plastic box. “We’ll need to suit her up before I can put on the splint. Choi, you’re going to help me. We need to be careful, because we could pop an artery if we move her too much.”

“And I could scream,” Kelly said breathlessly. Even though her eyes were closed, she was coming out of it. She was sweating slightly, and her blond hair was stuck to her forehead. Deep circles were forming under her eyes.

“Hey, take it easy,” Andrews told her. “We’ll do our best to make sure you don’t get hurt any further, all right?”

“That’d be awesome,” Kelly said, her voice faint and weak.

“Don’t worry, XO,” Laird said. “I’ll bust heads if anyone does anything stupid.”

Kelly smiled vaguely, then seemed to drop out again.



"All right, let's get suited up. We're abandoning the rig," Andrews said. "We'll go with full environmental gear, including respirators. I don't like the fact that someone might be shooting at us while we've got air tanks on our backs, but we're not going to live very long without them."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Laird asked. "The supports?"

"Too heavy. We'd never be able to hump those things out of here and our wounded at the same time."

"Mike—those are the things we need to get back to Harmony!"

"They'll be fine," Rachel said. "Even if the rig is destroyed, they'll survive. You already know how heavy they are, and the weight is because they're extremely dense. Fire won't harm them, and only shaped charges would be likely to make them unusable. It's safe to leave them here, Captain."

Laird shrugged. "Well, you're the SME," he said. "All right, crew. Let's suit up."

Andrews looked at Rachel and smiled at her as the others started prepping to leave the overturned rig. "I'll bet you're glad you came, huh?"

She took his hand. "I wouldn't have missed this for the world. Besides, for better or worse, right?"

"Yeah, well, I hadn't thought things could get much worse, but here we are," Andrews said, turning to the suit locker and pulling open its heavy door.

THE AIRLOCK WAS inoperable, and they discovered the SCEV's tailgate was also not available for use—the big loading door had been jammed shut in its frame when the rig rolled onto its back. That meant everyone would have to disembark via one of the side viewports in the cockpit, which could be used as an emergency exit. Loaded down with respiration gear and weapons—as well as one immobile crewmember and one walking wounded, exiting via the cockpit was no small chore. It took Andrews almost a minute to clear the vehicle and emerge into the wind-torn day. He conducted a brief security scan—there wasn't much to see, especially with all the loose dust blowing around—then turned back and assisted Leona in exiting the dead SCEV. Rachel and Choi came next, then Mulligan, and they all helped him pull Kelly Jordello's still form through the opening, handling her as gently as they could. Andrews saw her eyes were open but glassy behind her visor. Either she had slipped deep into shock, or the codeine was strong enough to dope her up. Laird was the last to emerge, and it took him quite some time to fumble his way out of the vehicle. Once he did, the crew looked toward the eastern horizon.

Through the blowing dust, Andrews saw the brewing storm squatting on the horizon, a dark mound illuminated by brief bursts of internal pyrotechnics. A malignant mass, pregnant with the promise of death.

"Look at the size of that front," Leona said, awe clear in her voice when she spoke over her mask's transceiver.

"I see it," Andrews said. He turned in a half-circle, trying to get an idea of the terrain. He recognized the general area, but it wasn't until the wind ebbed for a moment and the dust began to settle that he saw a low-lying ridge several hundred meters to their left. He pointed it out to Laird. "Jim, get everyone to that ridge over there. Hide in the rocks. Choi and I will hang back and give you some cover for as long as we can." He turned to Mulligan. "Sarmajor, you go on ahead. Try to make it to Harmony's perimeter. Someone's got to be watching for us."

Mulligan scowled behind his visor. "What? I can't leave now."

"The odds are what they are, Sergeant Major." Andrews felt suddenly weary, and he wished he could rub his burning eyes, but the full facemask of his respirator prevented it. "They won't change very much if you stay. And you've got the skills—if anyone can survive in this shit, it's you."

Mulligan stood where he was, looking directly at Andrews. His scowl was gone now, replaced by an odd look Andrews hadn't seen before. Was it respect, or something else?

"Hit the road, Sergeant Major," he said finally, when Mulligan made no move to obey. "That's what we call an order, just in case that flew over your head the first time."

The two men looked at each other for another moment, then Mulligan shifted his rifle and reached into the knapsack that hung from his side. He pulled out three forty-millimeter grenades and handed them to Andrews.

"Here, take these. They're old, but they'll still work. Standard M441 rounds, nothing fancy and nothing that'll be likely to take out an SCEV. But if you can get a shot at the radome, take it. Otherwise, they'll be about as effective as a frying pan."

"Hey, better than nothing," Andrews said. He had two of the SCEV's original loadout of forty-millimeter grenades, and Choi had the last one. He handed two to Choi and kept one for himself.

"Good luck, sir. I'll be back," Mulligan said. Without further ado, he ran off, keeping to a crouch and heading due east.

"Jim, get the others to the ridge," Andrews said.

Rachel took one of his gloved hands in her own. "Mike, I'd really like to stay with you."

Andrews shook his head. "No way, hon. There's nothing more you can do down here. Get to the ridge and hunker down. Help will come, believe me." He smiled at her, even though she couldn't see the lower half of his face. "No heroics here, I promise."

She looked at him keenly for a long moment. "I hope not." She reached out and touched his mask. "I can't even kiss you good-bye."

"Then kiss me hello later," he said.

"Andrews, I'm going to need help with Lieutenant Jordello," Laird said to Rachel.

"Get going," Andrews told Rachel. He nodded to where Laird and Leona stood over Kelly's supine form. She wore a vacuum splint on her injured leg, which had in turn been bound to her uninjured limb by several cravats.

"On it, Captain," she said to Laird, slowly turning away from Andrews. She helped Laird haul Kelly into a fireman's carry, despite the fact the splinted leg made the action awkward. Laird didn't seem to notice, and he set off toward the rock-strewn ridge hovering in the distance. Leona followed, hobbling on her injured leg, an assault rifle in her hands. Rachel looked back at Andrews for a moment, then turned to join them. The wind began to blow again, and the billowing dust swallowed them from view.

"Choi, ready?" Andrews asked.

"You know it, sir," Choi responded immediately.

"All right. About three hundred meters to the south, there's that region of rocky outcrops. You know which one I'm talking about?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's where we're headed. Follow me, and keep low." Andrews headed off in the opposite direction from Laird and the others, keeping low and moving as quickly as he could through the flying dust. He glanced back occasionally to ensure Choi was still with him, but he kept moving. They were out in the open and, for the life of him, he couldn't understand why they weren't already dead.

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Law had laughed aloud when he saw his second missile strike the ground near the SCEV and the resulting explosion that lifted its right tires high into the air. The rig seemed to hang there for a moment, like a stunt driver doing a trick in one of the mindless adventure films he had watched as a youth, and for an instant he thought it would slam back to the ground and continue on. But slowly, inexorably, the rig leaned further to the left until the chance of recovery died. The SCEV grounded on its left side, tearing a huge gash in the dry earth as it slid along for several meters before turning turtle, crashing onto its back in an explosion of dust. Bits and pieces of the vehicle flew through the air as panels and antennae and even the forward-looking infrared scanner and one tire were shorn off by the force of the impact. The vehicle ground to an abrupt halt, and columns of steam and smoke erupted from its undercarriage.

Law had to confess, it had been quite some time since he'd seen anything so beautiful.

He moved to fire a final missile, which would surely strike true and blast the vehicle into flaming wreckage. Right before his fingertip touched the button on the LED display, he stopped, pulling his hand back to his side.

*I want to see them. I want to see them die with my own eyes, if I can.*

In order to do that, he would have to reverse course and navigate around the ridges. The upthrust he was parked on had far too sheer a face to safely maneuver the vehicle across, and he had no intention of dying out here with Andrews and the others. So, he cautiously reversed the rig in the direction he had come.

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Andrews and Choi set up in the rocky abutments several hundred meters from the overturned SCEV. The wind continued to mount, and dust swirled through the air. Andrews made sure the dust cover on his assault rifle was closed, then checked to ensure the grenade launcher was ready to go. He hadn't heard anything from Laird or the others, nor did he expect to; they were to observe radio silence unless something untoward occurred. Even though their channels were encrypted, Law had military experience, and it was conceivable he could use the signal-hopping radios in SCEV Four to find the channels reserved for their use. Not very likely, of course—while Leona had been very informative in describing to Law how to use the vehicle, he had only had access to her for a few hours, and something such as spoofing an encrypted communications channel likely hadn't been one of his priorities.

In the distance, through the billowing clouds of dust, Andrews caught a glimpse of movement.

SCEV Four appeared, bouncing out of the ridgeline. Once it made it down to the flat plain, it accelerated toward the overturned hulk of SCEV Five. Andrews looked to his left, where Choi was positioned about fifty meters downrange. Choi met his gaze and he nodded, pointing at his grenade launcher. Andrews motioned for him to hold his fire. There was no sense in alerting Law to their presence if he already thought they might be dead.

He turned his attention back to the SCEV as it advanced through the dimming light of the day. It stopped two hundred meters from the wrecked vehicle and sat there, its turbine engines whining, missile pod extended, miniguns oriented toward SCEV Five. The FLIR turret on the rig's nose slewed left and right, as Law used the optics to surveil the area. After thirty seconds or so, the rig began to trundle forward, slowly bumping its way across the plain, drawing closer to SCEV Five's shattered form. It circled the dead rig, slowing every now and then, the FLIR turret turned toward it, as if Law thought he could use the device to peer through the armored hulk and see what lay inside. The rig circled around the wreckage twice before it accelerated back toward the ridge. Two hundred meters away, it turned back until its snout was pointing more or less at the destroyed SCEV.

*Come on, guy ... Get it over with.*

Andrews didn't have to wait for long. Seconds later, another Hellfire missile leapt out of the extended pod on SCEV Four's back and roared across the darkening plain on a pillar of fire. Andrews had only an instant to crouch down behind the rocks he was using as cover before the projectile climbed up, gained altitude, and nosed down. It slammed into the overturned rig's belly and exploded. Even several hundred meters away, Andrews was shocked by the ferocity of the explosion. One moment, the wrecked SCEV was there, the next, most of it vanished in a gout of flame and smoke and thunder that sent a shockwave racing across the wasteland. The missile managed to decimate the rig's self-sealing fuel tanks and ignite the propellant that remained inside. The remains of the SCEV began to burn, bright and furious, the flames dancing in the gale that carried the black smoke to the west. A moment later, pieces of debris began raining down on him. Something clanged against one of the rocks beside him, and Andrews saw it was an access plate to one of the MEP electronics racks, twisted and burned. Just like the remainder of SCEV Five.

Andrews peeked around the rock, exposing half of his face. He knew the suits the team wore would help mask their thermal image, but the FLIR on SCEV Four was extremely sensitive; if Law knew what to look for, he might see a small sliver of heat through the gloom. That would be bad news for all of them. He watched as the SCEV sat unmoving, while SCEV Five continued to burn. A sudden series of pops erupted from the flaming vehicle as the 7.62 millimeter rounds in its magazines cooked off in firecracker-like detonations, which were made tinny and insignificant by the howling wind. Andrews studied the idling rig for a full minute, watching the vehicle's FLIR slew from side to side.

*What the hell is he waiting for?*

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Law sat in the cool, climate-controlled environment of SCEV Four's cockpit, his right hand on the FLIR control yoke. The immense heat given off by the burning rig distorted a good portion of the infrared picture, and the mounting wind began to drive flying dust even harder, which made visual inspection of the conflagration even more problematic. The vehicle's millimeter-wave radar returned nothing suspicious; there

was no sudden movement in the wasteland other than that driven by the winds, and the only sizeable metallic signature was on its back before him, burning away.

Still, Law wasn't convinced. Andrews and the others had had ample time to evacuate the overturned SCEV, unless they had a procedure in place to sit tight and wait for rescue. But would they do such a thing when they were under attack? Would they follow the usual SOP when they knew an armed aggressor was closing on them? Had they all been killed, or so severely injured during the rollover that they had been unable to exit the vehicle?

Judging by the sturdy straps that kept him anchored to the pilot's seat of SCEV Four, and the numerous straps and handholds spread throughout the rig, he rather thought death and injury, while possible, was unlikely. At least for the entire crew.

He began tracking the FLIR to the left, away from the burning remains of SCEV Five. To the left, the landscape rose slowly into a series of small, low-lying ridges. Law panned the sensitive infrared device across them, zooming in occasionally when a feature caught his interest, but for the most part, the landmarks were rather unremarkable and, like the rest of the plain, exhibited a definite lack of life.

Something moved among the rocky ridgeline. Law zoomed in on it immediately, and he caught a quick glimpse of a head peering over the rock, a head that was hidden beneath a white hood and a gas mask of some sort. Definitely a person, and whatever he or she wore very closely resembled the same suits Andrews and the others had been wearing in San Jose. The heat signature was barely above the ambient temperature of the ridge itself. If he hadn't been paying close attention, he would have missed it. As he watched, the head dipped down behind the rock, disappearing from view.

Law slewed the miniguns in that direction and ripped off a burst, watching as the 7.62 millimeter rounds pulverized rock and earth, sending great gouts of dried soil exploding into the air. He walked the turrets from side to side, strafing the entire area until it disappeared beneath a cloud of dust and fragments of shattered rock. He ceased fire. He was down to just over seven hundred rounds of ammunition in the SCEV's magazines. He would have to be less indulgent in the future. Zooming in with the FLIR, he surveyed the target site, looking for any sign of life. As the dust cleared, he saw no movement, nothing that resembled a human being. That could mean they were either dead, or the attack had been ineffective—there was a good amount of rock sticking out of the ridge, and if the survivors from SCEV Five had managed to dig in or find a depression in which to lie, the minigun attack might have been useless.

*A missile should take care of that.*

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When SCEV Four suddenly opened fire on the ridgeline he had directed the others to, Andrews knew the gig was up. Law had seen something up there that had attracted his attention, and the target area was too close to where he believed Laird had led the others. He gauged Four's position to be just inside the max range of a forty-millimeter grenade, but figured the wind might give an attack a little more reach. When he saw

the Hellfire missile turret rotate to the left, Andrews figured he had no time to sweat it. He had to act.

He raised his rifle, flipped up the grenade launcher's windage sight, aimed for the missile pod, and fired.

And prayed.

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Law jumped back in his seat as something exploded against the copilot's viewport, filling the cockpit with a thunderclap of sound and fury that left him with ringing ears and a headache. The viewport itself didn't buckle, but the explosion gouged several deep chips out of it and ripped the wiper blade from its mount and sent it hurtling through the dirty air. The LED displays on the copilot's side of the cockpit flickered for a moment, then resumed their normal operation. No alarms sounded, but several caution lights came on—one for the FLIR, which was now apparently stuck in a fixed position, glaring up at the ridgeline Law had just attacked.

Another explosion erupted right in front of the SCEV, causing it to rock on its suspension. A beeping alarm sounded, and the FLIR display went dark, fatally damaged. Law pulled back on the control column and sent the SCEV hurtling in reverse for a hundred meters until he braked to a shuddering halt. Without the FLIR, he was now dependent on the millimeter-wave radar and his own eyes. He had already noticed the effectiveness of both systems was being slowly compromised by the approaching storm; the tempest's electromagnetic discharges were sufficient to degrade the radar's performance, and the blowing dust was most certainly reducing his visibility.

But Law had another tool at his disposal.

"All right, Andrews," he said aloud. "All right. My turn, now ..."

He leaned back in his seat and relaxed as much as he could. Reaching into himself, he clicked on the switch in his mind that allowed him to extend himself, to let his mind detach itself from his body and float into the distance, connected to his body by only a small thread of consciousness. He became hyper-aware of his surroundings: the susurrations of air moving across him from the cockpit vents, the smell of sweat and metal and oil, the light but steady vibration of two turboshaft engines running at low idle power. Then more, from outside the vehicle: the surprising dry heat of the air, the pressure of the wind as it continued to build, the vague sensation of dust whispering across his phantom hand as it reached out across the wasteland with probing fingers, reaching for something—anything—that might indicate life outside of his own. It took a great physical toll upon him, extending his consciousness in such a way; his body began to break down fat reserves to provide fuel for the action, and his heartbeat and breathing elevated, as if he were in the middle of a hotly contested marathon. Law was only peripherally aware of these things; the vast majority of his attention was focused on that great hand of his, reaching out from the SCEV as it explored the environment outside. One of those phantom digits brushed against something that possessed a restrained bioelectric field, something he had been altered and then trained to detect, even if it lay outside

his field of view. Law focused on the signature, bringing all his talents and decades-old training to bear. As he did so, he caught spectral glimpses of other bio-signatures in the area—four on the ridgeline he had attacked, and another closer to the first. All diminished by the suits they wore, he knew, but still detectable, despite everything.

Law fixed on the first signal and redoubled his efforts, sending a suggestion along the ethereal connection he had established, even as his body screamed for him to stop, to disconnect, to stop himself from pushing past his limits. He ignored the warnings for as long as he could, hoping he could maintain contact long enough to do what was needed.

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Andrews felt a queer sensation in his gut, and he had the disconcerting notion he was being watched. A wave of panic crested in his breast as he realized he had felt that sensation before—when he had first met Law, only moments before that horrible, terrifying pain had taken hold of his body and threatened to decimate his mind. Andrews felt the bolt of wild-eyed fear begin to take hold, and he might have actually cried out, but mysteriously, Law's presence retreated, fading but not disappearing, growing dimmer with each passing second until it was barely a glimmer of memory. Andrews gasped for breath, surprised at the fear and loathing he had felt, but thankful that unendurable agony had not come.

*How did he do that?*

"Skipper ..." Choi's voice was soft and somewhat slurred over Andrews's radio earphones as he broke radio silence. "I feel really funny ..." There was a peculiar lilt to the younger man's voice, as if he were drugged, swept up in some sort of narcotic dream.

*It's Law. He's got a fix on Tony!*

"Choi, I'm headed for your position now!" Andrews pushed himself to his feet. Keeping to a crouch, he ran toward Choi's position, but found he couldn't see him any longer—the wind had picked up to at least sixty miles per hour, and the thick dust was flying hard and fast. Andrews stumbled as the gale tore at him, like a living thing trying to grab him and throw him to the ground. He pressed on against it, fighting his way through the maelstrom, his crouched position not helping, given the heavy environmental gear and body armor he wore. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, moving as quickly as he could and stumbling over grapefruit-sized rocks and loose earth. Through the deepening murk, he saw Choi kneeling behind his cover. He was facing Andrews, but he gave no indication he saw him. He trembled and shook, as if deep in the grips of a seizure. As Andrews drew nearer, he saw Choi's eyes were wide and panicked behind the visor of his facemask. Inexplicably, he slowly pulled his rifle against him, the collapsible stock fully retracted. Andrews slowed, and a worrying thought wormed its way through his mind.

*Is Choi going to shoot me?*

"I can't stop myself," Choi mumbled. "Help me, I can't stop ..."

He watched as Choi placed the barrel of the rifle under his masked chin. Andrew lunged forward, stumbling over a large stone as he reached out to knock the rifle



away. His gloved fingertips barely grazed the weapon's upper receiver as he lost his balance, collapsing to the hard ground right in front of Choi. He grabbed Choi's boot and pulled with all his might, trying to jar his aim. The rifle barked, and he knew he was too late. Horrified, he watched as the 5.56 millimeter round punched a hole through the top of Choi's skull, blasting his mask askew and ripping apart the protective hood. Choi shivered once, then slowly listed to the right until he collapsed to the parched earth. Dark blood pumped from the horrible wound in his skull for a moment before it stilled as his heart beat its last. Andrews cried out and scrambled toward Choi's corpse on his hands and knees, but it was far too late for him to do anything. Choi's eyes were still visible through the crooked visor, and they were wide and staring, one looking to the left while the other stared straight on behind a half-closed lid.

"Choi. Oh, Tony ..."

Another voice came over his earphones. "Mike, are you all right?" Rachel asked.

Andrews squeezed his eyes shut, both to shut out the grim visage before him and to bite back the scathing response that came to him automatically when she broke radio silence. But it didn't matter—if Law could somehow exert enough influence over someone to force them to commit suicide, then a little something like chatter on an encrypted radio channel wasn't going to weigh heavily against them.

"I'm all right," he responded. "Choi's dead ... I don't know how, but that fucker in my rig made him kill himself."

Rachel started to respond, but Laird stomped on her transmission. "Four's on the move again—you'd better break off and get up here," he said. "We can hide out until the storm's pulse effect craps out the rig's radar. He's not going to be able to find us when the shit really starts to fly."

Andrews pushed away from Choi's cooling body and peered around the rocky outcrop he had been hiding behind. True enough, SCEV Four was slowly rolling forward. As he watched, the vehicle disappeared behind a filthy halo of light as its floodlight array snapped on, cutting a brilliant swath through the dust-filled air. It turned toward the ridgeline and Andrews lost sight of it momentarily as it disappeared behind the smoldering ruins of SCEV Five. It emerged on the other side of the smoking conflagration and deviated again, resuming its slow progress toward Andrews's general position.

"Roger that," Andrews said. He turned back to Choi's body and pulled the rifle off the corpse, then fussed with the tactical carry rig strapped to Choi's body armor. He figured he would need every magazine and grenade he could get his hands on. He pulled the body into a sitting position, trying not to watch as Choi's ravaged head tilted toward him, exposing the hole the round had made as it passed through his crewmember's skull. He unfastened the rig's Velcro tabs and pulled it off the body and hooked it over his left arm. He slowly lowered Choi's body back to the bloodstained ground as gently as he could and bowed his head for a moment.

*Looks like I'm going to have to leave you here, buddy. I hope you won't hold it against me, okay?*

Laird spoke again, this time with greater urgency. "Come on, Andrews—move it! He's closing in on you!"

Andrews raised his head and looked toward SCEV Four. It was still coming, though very slowly. Andrews wondered if Law might have lost the FLIR. That would explain why he had switched on the lights. If he was relying on those to see with, then Andrews saw no reason to let him keep the advantage. While the SCEV and its various components had been built tough, the floodlights weren't especially immune to physical damage.

"Laird, you have an angle on the rig?" he asked.

"Roger. What do you need?"

"I think he's lost the FLIR. He's half-blind, and when the storm gets closer, he's going to lose a lot of MMR capability."

"Roger that, but is there something you need us to do?"

"Take out his fucking lights," Andrews said. "Let's leave that fucker blind, so I can make a run for the rig."

"Ah, roger on the lights, but what's this about running down the rig? You figure you're just going to walk up, pop the airlock, climb inside, and bitch slap the guy?"

"Pretty much." Andrews opened his M320 grenade launcher and pulled out the expended cartridge and loaded a fresh one. Then he pulled the M320 off the rail on the underside of Choi's rifle barrel. He removed the magazine from the M416 itself, ejected the round in the chamber, and leaned the rifle against the rock next to him. He didn't need it any longer, and he didn't want to lug around its weight.

But the grenade launcher ... that, he decided to keep. He ensured the weapon was loaded, then clicked on the safety and shoved it inside his knapsack. It might be handy to have it nearby.

Just in case.

**“E**KLUND, YOU CURRENT on the M416?” Laird asked as he made a quick system check of his own rifle. As he had no grenades, he had no grenade launcher attached, only a forward hand grip to give him better control. The weapon was loaded, charged, and ready. He flicked off the safety.

“I am,” Leona said.

“Then you’re with me. Andrews, stay here with Jordello. Keep down, don’t move a fucking muscle until someone tells you otherwise. You get me?” Laird looked over at Rachel, taking note of her wide eyes. She nodded fractionally, not looking at him, but at the SCEV moving across the darkening plain below. The harbinger of death, slowly stalking her husband. Laird was sure she was torn up inside, so he grabbed her arm and forced her to look at him.

“Andrews, do you read me?” he asked, his voice brusque and full of iron, even though he didn’t feel it in his heart.

“Yes,” she said finally. “I heard you the first time.”

“Then listen to this: if we don’t make it back, you need to bury yourself and Jordello with as much earth as you can. You’ll run out of canned air in an hour, so make sure this,” he pointed at the filter can in the flexible composite hose that connected his air tank to his respirator face mask, “is exposed to the environment. Don’t bury it. It’ll filter out all the particles that you could inhale. It’s got a threaded connection. Just unscrew it when your tank runs dry, then do the same for Jordello. Bury yourselves and leave the filters on the surface. Can you get to your entrenching tool?”

She reached around and pulled it from the magnetized hook it hung from on her back and held it up for him to see. “Yes.”

“Know how to use it?”

“What is this, a job interview?” Her voice sounded shrill over the radio.

“Rachel, do what Jim tells you.” Andrews’s voice was calm and rational over the radio net. “Just answer his questions. We’ve got stuff to do, and arguing with Jim is only slowing us down.”

“Yes, I know how to dig a fucking hole!” she snapped. “I know it needs to be big enough for both of us, we need to be covered by at least twenty-four inches of dirt, and it has to be packed as hard as it can be so the wind won’t scour it away.”

Laird grunted. “Okay, sounds good to me.” He raised his head slowly and looked down at the plain. He had gotten sloppy before, exposing himself when Law was clearly surveying the ridge and causing the group to be on the receiving end of a withering fusillade of 7.62 millimeter minigun fire. Thankfully, the rock had been dense enough to prevent anyone from getting killed. A missile strike, though ... That would be a different matter altogether.

"Let's roll, Eklund." He pushed himself into a crouch. "I want to move at least a hundred meters downrange. Keep up as best as you can."

"Roger," Leona said. She got to her feet and hobbled after him as he set off down the ridge.

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Law was bathed in sweat, despite the cool, conditioned air that whispered across him. His hands trembled, and he felt vaguely nauseous. Extending his senses over such a vast distance and at such amplitude to take over one of his enemies had taken a remarkable toll on him. He had no idea who it was he had found; such knowledge was available to him only at close ranges, and it had been a miracle he had been able to interact with the target's mind at all. It would have been easier to induce a fatal cardiac infarction, as he had been trained to do, but he had no idea of the team's medical capabilities. So he had merely compelled the mark to commit suicide, something he had done numerous times in the past while keeping the family in line—it prevented any blowback among the family, because it could never be proven that he had forced the individual to hang himself, or slash her wrists on a piece of rusted metal. But overpowering a man's sense of self-preservation over such a vast distance and forcing him to shoot himself had been enormously taxing, leaving Law shaken and weak, as well as ravenously hungry and thirsty. He would need to replenish his body's energy stores as soon as possible.

*Was it Andrews?* he wondered dimly as he lay gasping in the pilot's seat. *Was he the one I killed?* He tried to recall the more intimate aspects of the connection, but there was nothing much to pick over. It had been as empty and impersonal as a simplex radio connection where the caller could speak, but could hear nothing back.

Through blurry eyes, he looked out at the terrain beyond the viewports. The skies were growing ever darker as the massive storm loomed closer, radiating bursts of lightning that flickered and flashed across the landscape. Still struggling for breath, Law hunted around the instrument panel until he found the switches for the rig's floodlight arrays, located on the overhead panel. He flipped them on and was rewarded with a substantially brighter view of the bleak environment outside. He noticed that the radar display was reading more and more clutter, garbage through which it could not see. That worried Law. He would have to try to get a hold on himself and finish the task at hand. There were still others outside to hunt down, and he would be best served by starting with the grenadiers first. He knew he had killed one; now, he had to do the same to the others.

Rubbing his eyes until his vision cleared, Law sat up in the seat and pushed the control column forward. The SCEV slowly rumbled forward, swaying slightly in the wind. The hunt was once again afoot.

Slowly, the rig drew closer to a brief line of rocky outcroppings. Law peered through the viewports. The floodlights revealed more detail as the vehicle approached the formation in the landscape. He decided this would have made an excellent position to attack from; not only did upthrusts of stone provide more than conceal-only

cover, he got the distinct impression the plain rolled away gently on the other side. The decline would provide additional protection, from both weapons and radar.

Something winked in the darkness to the left and above the SCEV. He heard several objects slam into the SCEV's nose. The floodlights suddenly went dark as glass exploded. Sparks played along the SCEV's nose as several pockmarks appeared in the viewport right before his eyes. Law made a strangled, enraged sound as the floodlight array was destroyed. He reached for the radar display and tapped the screen, highlighting the area on the ridge from where he believed the weapon fire had originated. He heard a distant whine as the missile pod automatically spun and locked in on the site, and one of the Hellfire missiles homed in on the spot. Law pressed the fire button on the display, and was rewarded with a brief hissing sound as the missile leapt from the rail and blasted across the darkening sky. A quick second later, a bright flash of fire and smoke signaled the weapon's impact as it powered into the ridgeline and exploded, sending great chunks of rock flying through the air. Debris rained down from the sky, peppering the SCEV as a column of smoke-filled dust rose into the air from the impact site. Law stared at the ridgeline for a long moment, looking for any movement, any sign that a follow-on attack was underway from that side. He saw nothing, but he held his position for a moment, watching and waiting, knowing the idling rig made an attractive target. He briefly considered expanding his consciousness again, allowing his mind to brush against the ridgeline, but that part of him was reluctant to function. He had severely overstressed himself, and to reach out with his phantom hand and explore the landscape would leave him incapacitated and unable to proceed any further with his plan. At least, until his attackers drew nearer.

*Come on, Andrews. Show yourself, you coward ...*

A chime sounded, followed by a male voice: *"Incoming. Incoming. Incoming."* Shocked, Law turned to the radar display and saw a pipper rapidly approaching the SCEV, arcing toward it from the sky above. There was a vague rumble as one of the anti-missile warheads erupted from its niche and curved upward to meet the incoming object, but the angle was wrong; the defensive system fired up and out from the SCEV, whereas the incoming round was coming almost straight down. It slammed into the top of the rig as the AMW projectile curved away, climbing uselessly into the sky where it detonated benignly fifty meters overhead. At the same time, another explosion rocked the SCEV, and the rig trembled on its suspension as the radar display went dark, replaced by a flashing legend that told him the array had been destroyed, no doubt by a grenade. With a shout, Law pulled the control column backward, backing away from the ragged line of rocky outcroppings, cursing himself over the loss of his last remaining targeting system. Now, the remaining Hellfire missiles were of no use, and he would have to fire the miniguns the old-fashioned point-and-shoot way.

*Still enough to kill them all.*

Another chime sounded, and Law swept his eyes across the displays, looking for the source of the notification. When he saw what it was, he slammed on the SCEV's brakes and reached for his harness release before the big rig had come to a full halt. The assault rifle propped up in the copilot's seat went clattering to the floor as he

reached for it, and he groped for it while staring at the engineering display in the center of the instrument panel.

The outer airlock door had opened.

Someone was aboard the SCEV.

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Andrews whooped when he saw SCEV Four's floodlights disappear into explosions of shattered glass that sprinkled across the rig's top and nose like a sudden snowfall, leaving the rig bathed in darkness save for where its LED position lights still gleamed. The rig ground to a halt less than twenty meters to his right, and Andrews could see the FLIR was knocked askew, its flat pane of mirrored glass turned away from him, pointing more or less at the ridgeline where Laird and Leona hammered the vehicle with aimed bursts of 5.56 millimeter rounds. He saw a vague outline behind the rig's viewports, a small, slender figure craning its head around, looking for his attackers. It was Law.

*Time to pay the piper, pal.*

Andrews pushed himself away from the clump of rock he was hiding behind and hurried toward the SCEV, keeping to a low crouch. "Good job, guys," he said over the radio. "I'm on the move now, closing on the vehicle—you should relocate."

"On it," Laird said.

Andrews was only five meters from the rig's nose when he saw the missile pod slewing to the left. "Look out, he's going to use a Hellfire!" He dropped down and knelt, raising his rifle. As he did, one of the missiles erupted from the launcher, riding a plume of flaming exhaust that was incredibly bright against the darkening sky. He heard a microphone key open, perhaps as Laird started to reply, but the transmission was cut off as the Hellfire slammed into the ridgeline and exploded. A small mushroom cloud of spark-filled black smoke erupted into the air, its shape a short-lived affair as the wind tore at it, breaking it apart and pushing the cloud downrange. Pieces of rock—some small as pebbles, others as large as a grapefruit—rained down around Andrews as he estimated the range to the SCEV. He would have to fire the grenade on a very short but high arc, one that was certain to be detected by the rig's millimeter wave radar. He had no idea if the anti-missile defense system would be able to intercept an object as small as a forty-millimeter grenade, but he had no choice. Rachel was up there, and if Law got off another shot, she would likely be killed. He pulled the trigger on the M320, and the grenade fired with a brief thumping noise. Almost immediately, one of the AMWs in the rig's side exploded away from the vehicle, curving up into the air. Andrews didn't wait to see what happened next. He pushed himself to his feet and made a mad dash toward the vehicle, more or less certain he was inside the radar's small blind spot. If not, he would find out the hard way.

Two explosions tore through the darkness, the first coming from directly atop the SCEV, the second from much higher as the AMW warhead detonated. The SCEV bounced on its suspension as Andrews ran toward it and flattened himself against its metal hide. Payload from the expended AMW pinged off the rig, and small eruptions

of dust exploded all around Andrews as a portion of the weapon's load of ball bearings hit the ground. None of them struck him, and he knew just how lucky he was—the projectiles were moving almost as fast as bullets, and were quite capable of killing him. More material rained down from above, and he saw it was pieces of shattered fiberglass. He didn't know if he had destroyed the rig's radar, but he had definitely destroyed the radome that encased it. He popped open the keypad access panel next to the airlock door, but before he could type in the entry code, he heard the rig's turboshaft engines begin to spool up. Next to the airlock was a series of maintenance access steps, hidden behind hinged dust covers. Andrews pushed his right foot into the lowermost step and boosted himself up, reaching for the next handhold. He grabbed it just as the SCEV's tires began spinning, and the rig rocketed backward. Andrews hung on for dear life as the vehicle roared away in reverse. He reached for the open keypad, but the vehicle was bumping so much that he would never be able to type in the code. Instead, he reached for the yellow and black handle next to the keypad, marked with the word RESCUE in red letters. He yanked on it, but it refused to move. He pulled harder—and almost succeeded in losing his grip on the maintenance ladder. Swearing and fighting to maintain his tenuous grasp on the SCEV, he pulled again. This time, the handle pulled outward with a pop, and Andrews felt the airlock's drive motors engage. The airlock door popped open, and he flung himself inside. He bounced off the hard wall inside the cubicle, and he grunted as he opened another panel, revealing the secondary emergency access. He yanked on it, and it pulled out from the recess easily. The inner door slid open into its pocket just as the SCEV slammed to a shuddering halt, throwing Andrews across the small aisle, where he crashed headlong into the science station. His helmet smashed into one of the displays there, fracturing the durable, coated plastic screen. An alarm blared, indicating the rig's pressure seal had been compromised, and that it was exposed to the hostile environment. Both pressure doors at either side of the second compartment began to slide closed automatically. Andrews reached across the science station and pressed down on the command override there, and both doors withdrew into their pockets. He whirled toward the cockpit, and there was Law. Their eyes met for an instant as the smaller man pulled an assault rifle off the cockpit floor and pointed it at him.

*Well, this could end pretty badly for me—*

Andrews lunged toward him just as Law fired. Two rounds struck him right in the chest, making him falter, but his body armor stopped the small bullets cold, and the ballistic plates inside the tough Kevlar composite dissipated the shock across his entire torso. It felt as if someone had punched him hard in the chest, and his breath left him in a rush. Despite this, he charged right into Law, using his entire body as a battering ram. Law shouted as Andrews crashed into him, driving him back against the instrument panel. The rifle went off again, discharging into the copilot's seat. Andrews pinned Law against the panel and reached down with both hands, fumbling with the weapon as Law tried to pull it away from him. Realizing he'd never be able to take control of the weapon in such close confines, he hit the magazine release and tore it free. The magazine dropped to the cockpit floor with a clatter. Law howled and released the weapon and slammed a fist against his facemask. Andrews felt the air

seal pop, and a red light came on just below his visor. Contaminants were now able to enter the suit's closed system. He responded by slamming into Law again, fists flying as he punched the smaller man in the face once, twice, three times, shouting incoherently as blood exploded from Law's nose. Law sagged and fell to the left, across the pilot's seat. Andrews reached for him, but Law grabbed the control column and pushed it fully forward. The SCEV's turboshaft engines shrieked as they dutifully spun up, delivering full power to the transmission. The rig's knobbed tires spun as they sought traction. They found it, and the rig lurched forward.

Heedless of the SCEV's uncontrolled roaming, Andrews grabbed Law and battered him relentlessly. He grabbed Law's neck in both hands and slammed his head into the instrument panel, tearing open his scalp. Law released the control column and lashed out with an elbow, slamming it into Andrews's face. Andrews's head snapped back from the impact, striking the cockpit bulkhead hard enough to stun him. He felt his legs go weak, and he reached out to grab the copilot's seat. He noticed the impact of Law's strike had, rather serendipitously, resealed his respirator facemask. Law kicked Andrews in the chest and drove him out of the cockpit. As the SCEV lurched across the landscape, Andrews felt his balance slipping away, and he fell half inside the open airlock. He thrashed about on the cold deck, which was already patterned with a sprinkling of dust. He grabbed a handhold and hauled himself to his feet and tried to unsling his rifle, but his movements were made clumsy by the heave and sway of the uncontrolled SCEV.

Law appeared in the airlock's doorway, blood streaming from his nose and his lacerated scalp. He glared at Andrews as the veins in his forehead pulsed with a sudden power. Andrews felt that peculiar electrical sensation building around him, and he released the handhold, grabbing his rifle in both hands and raising its barrel, intending to fire on Law from the hip. He never made it. Before he could do more than raise the weapon, his nerves erupted in a blinding, searing agony that brought him to his knees. He screamed, loud and long, caught up in the embrace of an exquisite agony he had prayed he would never feel again. Andrews started to black out, and he looked up at Law, seeing him as if through a rapidly lengthening tunnel. He tried to will himself to raise the rifle and fire, but his arms refused to comply; his body was shutting down in a final attempt to ward off the agony. Then it was gone, as quickly as it had come, leaving Andrews gasping for breath. A sudden bout of nausea grabbed him, and for a moment, he feared he might vomit into his facemask. He reached out for the handhold, and the assault rifle slipped out of his grasp as he lolled against the side of the airlock. It was right at his knees, only inches away. He reached toward it with a trembling hand, but the SCEV heeled upward and the rifle slid away from him, coming to a rest against the blood-splattered deck at Law's feet. The smaller man fell to his knees and grabbed the weapon, pointing it at Andrews. Law looked drained, diminished; dark circles had sprouted beneath his eyes, and the blood continued to flow from his nose and scalp, leaving him wearing a mask of bloody gore across his face.

"Did you really think you could beat me, Andrews?" His voice was barely a ragged whisper above the beeping alarm, the howling wind entering the open airlock, and the slowly winding-down engines. "Did you *really* think you would win?"



Without waiting for an answer, Law raised the assault rifle and aimed it at Andrews's head.

The SCEV heaved once again, this time with great violence as the deck tilted upward at a crazy angle. The rifle fired a burst on full automatic, right across the airlock's overhead, missing Andrews entirely as he fell backward. He bounced off the airlock's ledge, then tumbled out of the vehicle as it crashed to a brutal halt. Andrews heard rock crumbling and metal screeching as the SCEV bucked to an explosive standstill, then he slammed into the hard ground. Fire blossomed along his right wrist and he grunted, but the pain was nothing compared to the tapestry of agony Law had crafted with his inhuman powers. As a cloud of dust boiled across him, he pushed himself to a sitting position. He felt a strange buzzing sensation in his head, and he wondered if he had suffered a concussion somewhere along the way. He looked up at the SCEV towering over him at a drunken angle. The rig had impaled itself on a spire of rock, and one of its front tires was tilted at a crazy slant. He could tell just by looking at it that the rig's front axle had been shattered. The SCEV had gone as far as it could go.

"Mike! Mike!"

Rachel's voice sounded tinny and distant over the radio. Andrews made to answer, but he couldn't form any words. He cleared his throat, staring up at the SCEV. He felt like he was swimming in a world full of cotton, and most of it had managed to wind up in his mouth.

"Rachel," he croaked. "Stay where you are. I love you, baby." He tasted blood in his mouth, and he felt more pain in his chest when he breathed. *Cracked ribs, if I'm lucky.*

Law appeared then, slumping against the doorway of the opened airlock. He looked down at Andrews with bleary eyes, moving unsteadily. His face and the front of his dark, rancid garments were soaked in blood, but he still held onto the assault rifle. He slowly raised it, bringing it to bear on Andrews.

"Why?" Andrews shouted suddenly. "*Why?* All we wanted were the core supports. If your people hadn't attacked us, we would've been gone by sundown!"

Law smiled crookedly. He paused to spit out a bloodied, fragmented tooth, then looked down at Andrews as he sat in the dust. "After all we've been through ... after years of disease, famine, violence ... you expect me to believe your intentions were nothing but *honorable*? Tell me another one." He waved an arm, indicating the dark, storm-torn wasteland surrounding them. "Look at all you've done. Look at the legacy of mankind. Your kind's a *plague* on the planet!"

"Your people are going to die anyway!" Andrews shouted.

Law shook his head. "Think so? That we can't survive another day without your supposed help? We've sucked it up for a decade, Andrews! Though the sickness still claims many of us, with every generation, we become stronger. We adapt."

Andrews laughed. "Adapt? Adapt for *what*? Take a look around, pal—there's nothing left to inherit! You've got all these mental powers—you *know* we could've helped all of you to live as people again!"

"People destroyed the planet, Captain," Law said wearily. "My family will live. They'll be better than what we were before. Something admirable."

"Admirable, huh?" Andrews chuckled humorlessly. "Try amoral, you sick fuck. It's a much better fit."

"History's written by the winners." Law seemed to gather his remaining strength. He pushed himself upright and stepped away from the airlock's sill. He shouldered his rifle and aimed it squarely at Andrews's head. "I'm sorry, Andrews. But it's just too late for me to take any more chances."

Light flared suddenly through the gloom, shining across the SCEV's battered frame. Law looked up, and his mouth opened in frank shock as the illumination grew in intensity. A growing wail could be heard above the wind, and gravel crunched behind Andrews. He turned and looked over his shoulder, wondering if what he saw was a mirage or merely wishful thinking.

Emerging from the clouds of dust behind him were two SCEVs. Their minigun turrets were fixed on SCEV Four as they braked to a halt fifty meters away, their engines spooling down, their floodlight arrays blazing.

"No ..." Law's voice was barely audible above the din of the storm and the idling rigs sitting nearby. "No, no, no, *no!*"

Andrews snapped out of his funk. He reached into his knapsack and pulled out the M320 grenade launcher. Grabbing its pistol grip in his right hand, he flicked off the safety and raised it, pointing it right at Law. Law became aware of this a moment too late, and both men fired at the same time. A hail of bullets slashed at the ground right in front of Andrews, peppering him with debris. At the same time, the grenade launcher bucked lightly in his hand, and the forty-millimeter round slammed into Law's waist and exploded, blasting the man right in two. Ribbons of gore splattered across Andrews before he could move, and he closed his eyes instinctively. When he opened them, Law's ragged torso lay right before him. As he watched, Law's remaining arm flailed about, grasping at air, fingers curled into claws. Their eyes met, and Law's lips moved soundlessly. Blood bubbled upward from deep inside him, and whatever Law was trying to say was lost as he choked on his own fluids. The light faded from his eyes, and Andrews watched as dust covered the mutilated corpse, turning the warm blood into a pasty crust.

He became aware of someone calling his name. He looked up as a figure loomed over him. It was Mulligan, and his white environmental suit was almost brown with filth.

"Mulligan," he said, stupidly. "You made it."

Mulligan nodded, looking down at the disfigured corpse. "So did you."

Other suited figures appeared. They reached down for Andrews and, as they hauled him to his feet, another jolt of pain from his injured ribs made him pass out.

**L**LAIRD, LEONA, KELLY, and Rachel had been taken down from the ridgeline. All were alive, though Laird and Leona had been injured in Law's missile attack. The Hellfire had detonated thirty meters from their position, and both had taken shrapnel and shock damage from the blast, but were expected to survive. They were conscious and mostly alert when they were brought aboard SCEV Seven, which had been designated as the medical evacuation vehicle. Andrews, Kelly, Laird, and Leona were stationed in the vehicle's rear compartment, where two medics and the base surgeon tended to them. Andrews had suffered a broken left wrist and, as he had thought, several cracked ribs, but his injuries were considered light. Laird and Leona both had concussions and lacerations that needed to be cleaned and sterilized due to their exposure to the elements, and Kelly was in severe pain from her fractured femur. The surgeon elected to wait until they returned to Harmony to set the break, but his portable X-ray and follow-on ultrasound diagnostics revealed she hadn't suffered any major blood vessel damage. She would have a difficult recovery, but she would live.

Once everyone was stabilized, they returned to the base in SCEV Seven. Mulligan remained behind to assist in the recovery of the core supports, and by the time the rig returned to the base, he had already reported that the supports were in good condition. Rachel had been right; while they couldn't stand up to an immeasurably more powerful earthquake, the objects were tough enough to survive an explosion caused by an anti-tank weapon. Upon their return to base, Andrews and the others were transported by litter down a personnel evacuation stairway, one that had lain dormant for almost ten years. There wasn't enough power available to operate the vehicular lift, so they had to be transported to the base by manpower. Andrews wanted to walk and save everyone the effort of carrying him, but the base surgeon overruled him. He would be transported like the rest of the wounded, his dignity be damned.

"Look at it this way, you get a hero's welcome no matter how you get home," Rachel had said to him on the way down the dark, winding staircase. She had been ordered to return to the base with the others, even though she had offered to assist in the recovery operation. It had been decided that she had been in the field more than long enough, and for that, Andrews was thankful. With the storm bearing down on them, he didn't want her exposed to the environment any longer than she already had been.

SCEV Three remained on the surface for another day, the core supports secured safely aboard as her crew weathered out the storm. There was no way they could enter the base while the storm raged above in full fury; there were far too many obscurants, and the radioactive fallout stirred up by the storm was lethal even through an environmental suit. Rachel had told them the core supports would be lightning

magnets, and that settled the issue. No one was willing to venture out with the supports; not because they might be killed, but because Mother Nature might deliver some award-winning examples of bolt lightning that could compromise the supports, wasting the team's hard work and sacrifice.

The base was dark and gloomy. Air quality was poor even though some intrepid engineers had pulled the batteries from the remaining SCEVs and used them to power the air scrubbers. They had to be run in staggered shifts to preserve the batteries. Recharging them required starting up an SCEV, and no one wanted to add poisonous exhaust to the mix, so power rationing was the standing order. The air smelled of sweat and oil, just like an SCEV after a long foray into the field. The difference was that there was the added tint of untreated sewage, which Andrews found more than slightly unpleasant.

*But hey, at least I'm alive.*

Which was better than three other people who had passed away while he was out on the mission. The injuries they had sustained during the earthquake were too grave, even with the sophisticated medical expertise available. Sometimes, Andrews knew, it was just a person's time to go. He thought about Spencer and Choi and felt guilty about their loss, regardless. At least they had gone down fighting. Fate had just given them the short straw.

Once the core supports had been brought into the base, it took another two days to install them and test the power generation equipment in the Core. After the systems had been validated, power was slowly restored to the base, level by level, with a few exceptions. The medical section was given priority for power allocation, as were the environmental systems. Over the course of another two days, Harmony Base came alive again, with heat, hot water, sterilized air, and light. Repair work continued day and night, and Andrews thought that after a month or so, no one would even be able to tell that the base had been severely damaged.

On the eighth day after recovery was completed and all systems were stabilized, a memorial service was held in the Commons Area. While all the bodies of the dead had been incinerated as soon as possible—the base's designers had provided a mortuary as well, because even when the world ended, survivors would continue to die—the command group had decided that funeral proceedings were to take place. To provide a degree of closure. A large memorial had been erected on one wall just after the war. Previously, only a small handful of bronze plates had been affixed to it, but dozens more had been added over the past few weeks. Each plate bore the inscribed names of the deceased, their birthdates, and the day they died. All the new additions had passed away in the first two weeks of June. Andrews, his wrist in a cast and his ribs bound, joined the line of survivors who filed past the memorial. He knew every name there, some better than others, but each bronze nameplate equaled a hole that would never be filled. Even though he had intended to be strong, to be the rock, he found that when he finally made it to the end of the line, he couldn't hold back his tears any longer. Seeing Spencer and Choi's names, and knowing how young they had been, was just too much. Even though they were a few years younger than him, they had grown up together, and he would always feel their absence.

"We've all been through hell and back—twice," Benchley said in his address. From the front of the Commons Area, he regarded the assemblage with clear eyes, his voice strong. "We've all lost people near and dear to us—twice. First in the Sixty Minute War, then on the earthquake of June ninth, and two more in the mission to recover the supports we needed in order to survive. The very fabric of our society here has had a hole blown right through it. But we're a strong people. We have to be, because our work is just getting started. We know now that there is life out there. It may not welcome us, it may fear us, it may distrust us, but it's life nonetheless, and we need to do everything in our power to help those who survived the war. It's what we're here for. It's what we're all about.

"I want all of you to look to the people next to you. I want all of you to reach out to each other, and help those who are in need get through the coming weeks and months. We all grieve together, regardless of rank or position or occupation. We are Harmony Base, and even burdened by the weight of our sorrow, we have a mandate: *quando mundum finit, opus nos incipiet*. When the world ends, our mission begins. We need to remember our fallen, but we need to keep putting one foot in front of the other." The general paused, then looked at Mulligan, who stood at attention nearby. "Look around you. Find those who have lost their way and help them get back onto the path because we need to walk it ... together."

A lone bugler clad in a spic-and-span Army Class A uniform played Taps. Mulligan, whose own Class As were accentuated by his green Special Forces beret, held rule over a formation of honorary pall bearers. All wore black arm bands. Andrews watched the assemblage as they picked up the ceremonial interment flag and neatly folded it into a tight triangle. Mulligan took the flag and marched toward Benchley, presenting it to the base commanding officer. Benchley accepted the flag with a grave expression, then returned Mulligan's sharp salute. Mulligan turned and dismissed the detail tersely, and they filed out of the Commons Area, preceded by the base's colors. Benchley and the command staff exited as well, marching in step in keeping with the protocols of a military service. Others slowly followed, but many more remained, sniffing, grieving, weeping.

Jeremy approached them, his eyes red, his expression downbeat. He looked up at Andrews and Rachel and forced a specter of a smile to his face as he embraced both of them. "I'm proud of you two," he said. "So incredibly proud, you have no idea."

"Thanks, Dad," Andrews said.

Jeremy released them, then reached out and touched Rachel's cheek. "Especially *you*, young lady. You really proved your stuff out there, and in a big way. Think you'll go military now?"

Rachel blinked. "Why do you ask that?"

"You're young, and you have an adventurous spirit. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to see you leave the Core," he said, sparing Andrews a wink, "but who knows? Maybe you're cut out for field work, yourself."

Rachel favored both of them with a pale, distracted smile. "I hadn't really thought of that. Maybe that's something to consider. Excuse me for just a second." She turned and walked toward the line forming in front of the memorial wall.

"Well, maybe that was the wrong thing to say," Jeremy said.

Andrews shook his head. "Nah. She's not upset with you, Dad. She's just ..." He shrugged. "She's just not herself, these days."

"That'll change. She's young. She'll heal."

Jeremy embraced him again and planted a kiss on his forehead, a display that would have embarrassed both of them weeks before. But after the earthquake and the reminder that life was so incredibly fragile, things like that no longer seemed to matter.

"I've got to get back to the Core," Jeremy said, his voice full of apologies. "There's still a lot to be done. Tell Rachel she has a couple of days off if she needs them."

"I'll pass it on."

Jeremy clapped his son on the shoulder. "Are you really my son? I can't believe I got so lucky with a winner like you."

"Blame Mom," Andrews said, smiling weakly. He found he suddenly missed his mother, even though he hadn't thought of her in weeks. He felt a strong pang of guilt when he realized that.

"Nothing to blame her for," Jeremy said, looking down at his feet for a moment. "She did right by both of us, but you got the best part of her. And thank God for that." He cleared his throat and wiped his eyes. "All right. I've got to go."

Andrews nodded. "I'll see you later. Take care of yourself, Dad."

Jeremy clapped his shoulder again. "Don't worry about me, son. I'm fine. Look after Rachel." He stepped away, walking toward one of the exits.

Andrews turned to the memorial and saw his wife standing at the end of the huge wooden plaque. For Rachel, the loss of the past few weeks were tragic, but none were as painful for her as the fact that the names of her parents were at the front of the list. Not for the first time, Andrews wondered how she'd been able to handle it, growing up in the base and going through the transition from childhood to womanhood under the care of watchful friends and well-wishers, but devoid of a parent's guiding hand. Andrews's mother's name was on the wall, as well; she had succumbed to ovarian cancer three years after the base had been sealed. He'd had his father to see him through the tough spots; Rachel had no blood relatives. Despite the hardship, she had grown up to become a woman to be reckoned with, as she had shown during the mission to San Jose. He could tell by the arch of her back and the set of her shoulders that she was grieving all over again. In that moment, he doubted he had ever loved her more. He walked over and joined her, and she folded her hand inside his.

"Babe? You okay?"

Rachel reached out and touched the plates that bore the names of her parents—Peter and Catherine Jane, who went by CJ. Though he had seen dozens of photos of them, he could only vaguely recall meeting them a few times in real life, during their first base orientation sessions, back when the Andrewses and the Lopezes had been selected to be part of Operation Harmony.

"I'm fine," she said, and she turned to face him. Her eyes were bright, but she hadn't shed any tears. The pain lingered just below the surface, like it always did. Andrews leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"Really?"

"Really. How are you doing?"

Andrews shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable with telling her the truth. He did it anyway. "A little guilty, I guess."

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Guilty? Why? About Choi and Spencer? What happened to them wasn't your fault, Mike."

"I beg to differ. I was their commanding officer. It was up to me to bring them home safe."

Rachel nodded. "Yeah, you were. And you did everything you could. The odds were just stacked too high. Trust me—I was there."

Andrews made a noise in his throat. She was right, of course, but that didn't do anything to stave off his remorse. He wondered how long it would take for him to be quit of it, but as he turned to look over the slowly thinning crowd, he decided he already knew the answer—he would never stop feeling responsible. Choi and Spencer were his crew, and he had been powerless to save them. They died under his watch, and that was a responsibility he would take to his grave.

He put that burden aside and kissed Rachel on the cheek. "Let's get out of here."

She nodded. "Yeah. Let's."

They turned to go, but Mulligan appeared in their path. The big man still looked battered, slowly-healing bruises and cuts on his face, but his appearance had improved considerably over the past several days. He regarded Andrews and Rachel with his dark eyes, his expression inscrutable. Andrews glanced at Rachel and saw she was staring at Mulligan with a cold, unreadable expression that was nearly as enigmatic as Mulligan's. When Andrews turned back to the sergeant major, he was surprised to find his eyes were uncharacteristically downcast.

"Can we help you with something, Sarmajor?" he asked.

"Ma'am, I'd like to talk to you, if I could. I know you're probably not feeling too hot, so I'll keep it short." Mulligan looked up and met Rachel's emotionless gaze. "I need to tell you about something that happened a long time ago. You might think you know everything about it, but ... well, I figure it's time you hear it from the guy who was there."

Silence descended, heavy and uncomfortable. Rachel stared at Mulligan for a long moment, ignoring the curious gazes of those who walked past. The history of enmity between them was well known, even though it was considered to be mostly one-sided. Mulligan stood before them, stoically enduring her cold, impenetrable glare, even though Andrews supposed it must have been embarrassing for him. As the seconds ticked by, he did not prompt her for a response; he merely stood there and looked back at her, his face a mask of disciplined composure.

Rachel finally favored him with a curt nod.

Mulligan cut his eyes over the Andrews. "Sir?"

"I think I'd like to hear what you have to say as well, Sarmajor. If you don't mind." Andrews looked over at Rachel to see if she had a different opinion, but she kept her gaze rooted on Mulligan.

The tall senior NCO took it in stride. "Very well. Would you like to go—"

"Here is fine," Rachel said, her voice taut as a banjo string, belying her impassive expression.

Mulligan met her eyes once again and nodded. He removed his green beret and stepped closer to Rachel. Even though their expressions did little to illustrate their internal feelings, Andrews nevertheless felt the uncomfortable tension between the two of them as if it were a physical thing. He glanced down and saw Mulligan was slowly twisting his beret in his hands, and he wondered if whatever the sergeant major was going to say would be a good thing, after all.

When he spoke, his voice was pitched low, but he kept his gaze on Rachel. "After the bombs dropped, I tried to get to my family with SCEV One. By *stealing* it, actually. Your folks cared enough about me to come along, to try and help. I was, uh—pretty crazy, then. I was within three weeks of retirement. Two days from terminal leave. I was basically just marking time, waiting for my replacement to show up. All of us were marking time back then, you might remember." He paused, but Rachel gave no indication she was going to speak, so he continued. "Visibility was zero. Radar and communications were useless, because of the electromagnetic pulse effect. Anyway, I was driving balls to the wall—all I could think about was getting to my wife and daughters before the fallout rolled over them.

"We got extremely unlucky when a ground burst went off only about a mile away. I'm not sure what they were aiming at—the best I can come up with is that one of the weapons heading for Wichita malfunctioned and came down way short. Your mother happened to be looking in the general direction of the blast when it went off—she went blind from the flash. Your father was standing between the cockpit and the science station. The EMP fried a good amount of the rig's systems, despite the shielding, and we stopped dead. Before I could do anything to get the rig moving again, the shockwave hit us. The SCEV rolled three times, tossed around like some kid's Tonka toy. Your father was killed instantly. One of the gravity belts on your mother's harness broke, and she was ejected from her seat. When it was over, she managed to hang on for another three hours. I had no voice contact with the outside world, and the rig was demolished. I figured there would be at least an attempt at a rescue, but it didn't come soon enough. CJ died in my arms." Mulligan looked down then, and the muscles in his jaw clenched as he gritted his teeth. Andrews saw the nightmare of pain and guilt in the big man's eyes, and he realized the Green Beret was something of a kindred spirit. They shared a deep responsibility for those they had lost.

Rachel stared hard at Mulligan, her face carved from porcelain. Mulligan hesitated for a moment, then looked up and tried to force a smile. It died stillborn when he met Rachel's unflinching glare.

"Do you remember how we were friends?" Mulligan asked, raw pain in his voice. "Your parents and me, we hit it off really well. You used to call me the Jolly Green Giant, because you thought I was so tall and always wore a duty uniform. Whenever I saw you in the corridor, I'd go 'Ho, ho, ho! Rachel Lopez!' and you'd laugh. Do you remember that?"

Rachel's expression didn't change, but she balled her hands into fists. As she continued to stare up at Mulligan, her knuckles were turning white. A small shudder went through her and tears rose in her eyes, but she didn't take her eyes off of Mulligan for an instant.



"Do you remember?" Mulligan asked again, bending toward her slightly, his voice hardly more than a whisper. There was a peculiar pleading quality to the question, and Andrews realized that Mulligan—the strongest, biggest badass in Harmony Base, and maybe in the entire Army—had been dying inside for years.

When she didn't answer, Mulligan straightened, transforming once again into the base's enigmatic command sergeant major. "So, anyway. Your family died trying to help me rescue mine, who died because I couldn't get to them. Somehow, the only son of a bitch who managed to walk away from it was me. God must've been laughing his ass off." Mulligan's voice was back to normal, the no-nonsense deadpan it had been for the past ten years. He displayed all the outward emotion of a robot, as if he were reading a readiness report aloud. It was as if he didn't care anymore; he had done his job, and that was all there was to it.

Rachel lunged at him, pounding on his big chest with her fists, making small, agonized sounds as she lashed out at him. Mulligan endured it, taking no steps to defend himself. Bystanders surged forward, shocked by the sudden display. Andrews pulled Rachel away from the towering soldier, wrapping his arms around her and ignoring the jolts of pain from his tortured ribcage.

"Why?" Rachel fairly shouted. "Why didn't you tell me this back then? Why did you let it drag on for so damn *long*?"

Mulligan looked down at her, ignoring the inquisitive looks from the other people standing nearby. His body language told them all they needed to know, and they stepped back, returning to whatever it was they had been doing before. But they kept looking toward the tall man and the crying woman, and Andrews saw expressions of sympathy among them. For Rachel. And for Mulligan.

Mulligan sighed heavily. "I should have told you. I should have tried to look after you. But I ... I couldn't. I always thought that was kind of funny, because before everything went to hell in a fast sports car, I was always a responsible guy. I always tried to do the right thing, even if it was hard. But this time, I decided to do the easy thing, and ignore what had happened to Peter and CJ. And I ignored you, and pretty much everyone else in this damned place." He looked at her and shook his head sadly. "Anyway, that's it. That's all there is. Your family left you because they wanted to help me, because they thought they'd be safe, that I'd do the right thing. I wound up killing them, and I let you down when you needed me the most. I just thought you should know." He paused for a moment, looking at Rachel. "I'm sorry. I'm so very, *very* sorry."

"So you think I should forgive you now?" Rachel asked, her voice quavering.

Mulligan shook his head. "I just want you to remember one thing: I miss them, too. Every day."

Mulligan turned on his heel and walked away, shoulders square, his heavy footsteps echoing in the large room. Almost everyone turned to watch him make his exit, then they turned back to Andrews and Rachel. Andrews ignored them and touched Rachel's face, wiping away her tears.

"Sweetie ...?"

She hugged him tight for a moment, then looked up at him. "I'm fine," she said, and her voice was stronger. She wiped her eyes with the heels of her palms and

smiled vaguely. "Actually, I feel better than I've felt in a long time."

"Then let's get out of here. I'm starting to feel like we've been on exhibit for the last few minutes."

"Yeah. Let's go home."

\*\*\*

Leona lay in the narrow bed she had been allocated in the medical section's recovery ward. The injury she had acquired in San Jose from the spear attack had become infected, and the base surgeon had wanted her to remain under his staff's direct care until her fever subsided and the wound started to show substantial improvement. That had been days ago, and the fever had finally broken the previous night. Her appetite had come back, and she was thrilled to discover that not only could she now eat and not immediately throw up, she had her choice of almost anything on the menu because full power had been restored. Even if it was the same chow as what they served in the Commons Area's commissary, she found it to be mighty tasty after enduring almost two weeks of SCEV chow, followed by a few days of not being able to eat at all.

In the bed beside her, Kelly Jordello was recovering from her own injuries. Her broken femur had been set, and her leg was in traction for the rest of the week. After that, the base surgeon would decide whether or not to insert pins to assist in her recovery. The two of them joked that since both of them had only one working leg each, the only way they could make a run for it was if they taped themselves together. They had watched the memorial service on the base's video network, and both were feeling more than a bit melancholy. Leona was staring up at the ceiling, lost in her own thoughts when Kelly suddenly said, "Well hello, Sergeant Major."

Leona looked up, and when she saw Mulligan standing between their beds, she felt as if her heart had jumped into her mouth. He was still in his Class As, and he held his green beret in one hand. Leona stared up at him, marveling at his attire. She couldn't remember seeing him in anything other than his Army combat uniform.

"Lieutenant Jordello, how are you coming along?" Mulligan asked, giving Leona a quick glance before looking down at Kelly.

Kelly indicated the traction rig that held her leg suspended in the air. "Well, I'd try and get out of here, but I don't think I'll get very far on foot."

Mulligan grunted. "Better stay where you are then, ma'am."

"Sharp threads, Sarmajor. What brings you here? Bedpan patrol?"

"No, ma'am. I flunked the candy striper test. Just as well, I hated the duty uniform. Excuse us, please." Mulligan yanked the privacy curtain between the two beds closed, hiding Kelly from view as he turned toward Leona. She looked up at him, confused.

"Sarmajor?"

Mulligan scowled at her. Combined with the mass of bruises on his face, the expression made him look positively ferocious. "Stop gaping, girl. You look like you've gone feeble." Before she could make a response, he stepped closer to the bed and held out the eagle medallion to her. Leona looked at it, watching as it swayed and twinkled in the room's antiseptic light.

“Uh, what—”

“My wife made that for me, out of a coin,” Mulligan said, cutting her off. “An Eisenhower dollar, actually. It seemed to attract your attention out in the field, and I ...” He paused for a moment, then sighed. “Well, I thought you might want to have it, is all.”

“Why would you want to give it to me?”

Mulligan considered that for a long moment, then shrugged. “My day to make amends, I guess. I treated you pretty badly out in the field, and you didn’t really deserve it. Sorry.”

“Oh.” Leona looked from the medallion to Mulligan as he towered over the bed. “Well, look, Sergeant Major. I’m not going to report it or anything, because I pretty much stepped over the line ...”

“So you’re not interested, then?” Mulligan asked, his voice flat.

Leona hesitated, uncertain of what to do. She couldn’t think of what to say, so she slowly raised her hand and took the medallion from him. She looked at it, turning it over in her hand. The details of the eagle were finely crafted, and even though she’d never seen such a creature before, she knew it was a symbol of strength and honor. It fit Mulligan perfectly.

“This has got to mean a lot to you, Mulligan. I mean—I’m flattered that you’d think of giving it to me, but that won’t bring absolution, you know? Your family will still be dead.” She wondered if she was saying too much; after all, the privacy curtain wasn’t exactly soundproof, and she had no trouble imagining Kelly hanging on every word.

“That’s not exactly what this is about,” Mulligan said, “but the offer stands, anyway.”

Leona regarded the medallion again, then looked up at Mulligan. He seemed different to her, now. There was something akin to humor in his eyes, and while it seemed foreign to her, it also seemed *right*, as if she was glimpsing the real Scott Mulligan for the first time. Despite his cuts and bruises, he seemed more alert, as if he’d just awakened from a very long, refreshing sleep. Leona still didn’t know what he was up to with this impromptu visit and unexpected peace offering—she couldn’t quite get her mind around the possibility that he was giving her a *gift*—but she knew what she hoped for. If this was her shot at getting it, then she had to take it.

“Thank you,” she said, hesitantly. “It’s very lovely.”

“Well, it’s not a wedding proposal or anything, so don’t mess up the sheets, okay?”

“*What?*” Leona suddenly laughed, in spite of herself. When Mulligan allowed a ghost of a smile to cross his lips, she knew he was teasing her. Humor from Scott Mulligan was something she’d have to get used to. “I wasn’t about to, Sergeant Major. But ... just what *does* it mean?”

Mulligan crossed his arms and considered her question for a long moment, his gaze locked on hers. “Well, Lieutenant, I guess it means that maybe we’ll sit down and have a talk sometime, once you get out of this overblown band-aid factory. If you can make the time, that is.”

“Yeah, I think I can make the time,” Leona said automatically, and the sudden eagerness of her reply left her feeling foolish and embarrassed. She felt her face grow warm. Either her fever had returned, or she was blushing.

“Cool,” Mulligan said, and he touched her arm briefly. His hand was warm and dry, his touch surprisingly gentle. “Catch you then, and get well soon.”

With that, he swept aside the curtain. Kelly lay in her bed with her eyes closed, mouth open, so obviously pretending to be asleep that it was almost laughable. Mulligan looked down at her, shook his head with a sigh, then headed for the door.

Leona called out to him before he could make a clean getaway. “But what’ll we talk about? Force protection in post-holocaust America? Diplomacy versus firepower? Mercury in retrograde?”

Mulligan stopped at the doorway and turned back to her. He looked at her frankly, and he allowed himself a vague smile. “You’re a funny girl, Eklund. I like that. But I’ll leave the topic of conversation to you—I can’t lead all the time. See you around campus.”

Then he was gone. Leona stared at the doorway for a moment, her mind whirling. *Did Mulligan just—*

“Did Mulligan just ask you out on a date?” Kelly asked, very much awake.

“I ... I guess?”

Kelly smiled and clasped her hands behind her head, looking up at the ceiling. “Well, in that case, I guess you’d better get well soon, Lee. I don’t know much about these things, but I’d say the big man still has a lot of *rawr* left in him, if you get what I mean.”

Leona wanted to ask her what she meant by that, but then decided she didn’t need to know. She would find out herself. All in good time. Her gaze returned to the medallion. She studied it for a long moment, and she realized a soft smile had spread across her face.

**R**EPAIRS HAD BEEN underway for an entire month. Benchley paid attention to every detail, and ensured that Jeremy Andrews and his team of engineers had enough manpower available, not to just fix what had been broken in the earthquake, but to reinforce and strengthen the outpost's power array. No one wanted to go through another event like the one they had just barely survived, and Benchley made it a priority for the engineers to move quickly and expeditiously. For weeks, everyone labored to put the base back together, and everyone had a hand in its restoration. Even Benchley had pulled on coveralls and spliced wire, welded piping, and serviced heavy equipment. No one was allowed any slack. Bit by bit, the station was patched up and made fully operational again.

But while Harmony Base was healing, it would bear scars for the rest of its life.

At night, in his quarters, he avoided sleep. Not because he feared his dreams—he had long since grown inured against them—but because Mike Andrews had finally delivered his mission log. And the things Benchley found in the report were shocking. Frightening. At times, even outrageous.

And most surprising of all, the report contained hope.

*Unconfirmed reports of other survivors from the Northwest.* Benchley found himself circling around that again and again. That there were survivors eking out a bare existence beneath the desolate rot that had once been San Jose had been surprising enough. But the mention—the mere *rumor*—of other survivors in the Northwest, where all the models and simulations had suggested that nuclear fallout would be less than anywhere else in the nation, set his mind roaming. San Jose was their first target, of course. But after that, Benchley knew the Pacific Northwest was their next destination.

*There could be a society there. So why wait?*

The notion took him by surprise. He had been planning on concentrating all the base's energies on contacting the survivors in San Jose, making peace with them, and even outright providing for them, if they would allow it. Harmony had tons of bounty in its stores, all manner of items that the remaining residents of San Jose would need. But they were likely a small group, smaller than Harmony's population. They wouldn't need much, comparatively speaking. It wouldn't take long to get them squared away, living like human beings again, as opposed to cannibalistic savages.

*We can do both.*

Benchley thought about that for a long time. Life after the Sixty Minute War had served only to refine his normally conservative approach to issues like this. Determine the mission. Plan the mission. Launch the mission. Support the mission. Sustain the mission. Exit the mission. Repeat.

But Benchley knew time was running short. Even though Harmony would survive, the next catastrophe that befell the post might be substantially worse. Mother Nature had already done what Mankind had not: wound the base, hurt it, send it a signal. There may not always be another tomorrow. And if the worst were to occur, the people of Harmony would need to find a place where they might be able to have a second chance.

The Pacific Northwest.

He nodded as he sat hunched over the log book and his tablet computer, his Spartan quarters illuminated only by the lamp on his desk. The Pacific Northwest. It was a veritable beacon flashing in the murky darkness as the sun slowly set across the decimated United States of America. He decided to make it the first order of business at tomorrow's command staff meeting. While he had to let the command staff weigh in on it, he saw another mission departing from Harmony, one commanded by Mike Andrews. The kid was a star performer, and there was no one better suited to carry the torch.

The world had ended.

And Harmony's mission had finally begun.

## AFTERWORD

*Earthfall* had an odd conception. Originally, I'd written a bare-bones novella in very late 1982, which I used as a kind of outline for a screenplay in the summer of 1983. It didn't take me long to write, as the adventure in the piece was so compelling that it kept me up at all hours, banging away on my shiny, new electric typewriter—personal computers were things of fancy back then—in between classes and dates and bottle after bottle of Pepsi. (It was sold in glass bottles back then, *real* glass bottles, not this tacky plastic we have today.) Back then, I was focused on writing a story that would combine the best of *The Road Warrior* with what little good there was to be found in the movie *Damnation Alley*...which basically amounted to some cool looking vehicles, and maybe a score by Jerry Goldsmith. I worked on that screenplay, off and on, for years.

Hollywood remained uninterested.

I put it away for at least twenty-plus years and forgot all about it, as one should when holding onto an unsalable property. Every now and then, I'd think back and reconsider it, but I always pushed it aside in favor of more contemporary projects, meatier projects that I could sink my teeth into. There are always new stories to be spun, and I try my best to look forward. After all, at my age, the road ahead is much shorter than the one in the rearview mirror, so I'd best keep my eyes up front. No telling what a guy might hit when blasting down the highway of life at 85 miles an hour.

Curiously, it was one of these “meatier projects” that led me back to *Earthfall*. I was working feverishly on a novel called *Tribes*, a Chrichton-esque adventure novel with a sprinkling of science fiction dusted over it. At the halfway mark, I began to lose steam, and the project started to wander. The story wasn't as lifelike as I'd hoped, and the characters were approaching insipid. No, that's not right. They *were* insipid. When a writer can recognize that in his own work, and can't write his way of the box he's written himself into, then it's time to step back and reevaluate.

Serendipitously, *Earthfall* came to mind again.

I pulled out the script—the novella has long since disappeared, and is nowhere to be found—and reread. Parts of it made me grimace in embarrassment. To think I'd actually shown this around! No *wonder* I was never the next hot thing in Hollywood. My skills sucked! The dialog was horrible, some of the sequences absolutely juvenile. I mean, twenty years after the bombs dropped, and people are turning into pumpkin-headed *mutants*? (Though in my own defense, I didn't have 50 foot scorpions leaping out the wasteland sand.)

But still...there was a story there. A very rough one, but a story, nevertheless.

So I put *Tribes* aside and resurrected *Earthfall*. And while it was trying at times, it was also fairly easy—I knew where I'd wanted it to go back in 1983, but I hadn't the chops to steer a story back then. I'm still unsure if I do three decades later, but I decided to make a go of it. It's not survivalist fare, and it still retains a patina of 1950s pulp science fiction about it, but I did try and toss in as much weight as the story could handle and still move like a cheetah with a Saturn V rocket shoved up its butt. If you've made it this far, I hope you agree. Or, at the very least, didn't find it too overwhelmingly odious!

Thanks are in order...

From 1983: Big shouts out to Rick Sylander, Kevin Slater, Marc Schliesman, Tim MacNary, Jill Ferrari, Caryl Dailey, Doug Aho, Leah Creatura, Todd Webster, Carolyn Payne, Gordon Dailey, Ann Juliano, Leonard Scott, Jackie Soma, Hank Netherton, and Bill Mellott. You all read the scripts, and for some reason, neglected to tell me every draft sucked. I've lost contact with many of you, but I love you all, and your friendship, love, and support will never be forgotten.

And now, in 2013: Joe LeBert, Fred Anderson, and the long-suffering Derek Paterson, for your reviews and views. Will Allen for your beta—your comments were significant. Bobby Cooper and Scott Campos, for the sanity checks. Craig DiLouie for the blurbs and kind words of encouragement. Jeroen ten Berge for some awesome cover stuff, and Nathan Carlisle for his depiction of the SCEVs. Editors Sean Fox and Lynn MacNamee at Red Adept for your editorial efforts, as well as Diana Cox at [novelproofreading.com](http://novelproofreading.com) for the final burnishing. And a salute to former Navy officer Paul Salvette and his lovely wife for formatting the ebook release.

Author disclaimer: despite the efforts of those above, the final result is all my doing. Mistakes and assorted grief are all mine. Accolades, if any are coming, are shared with all.

And the biggest thanks to you, the reader. It's been a ball corresponding with you all, via email, via Facebook and Twitter, and on my modest blog. You make a guy feel all right about himself, even when he steps in it.

Which is often.



*Stephen Knight lives in the New York City area. You can find more of his fiction at:*

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Sample Chapter:

## **THE CONVERT**

**by Fred Anderson**

Available at [Amazon](#)

# 1

I wasn't born a cripple. That's something I did to myself two days shy of my sixteenth birthday. *Drunk diving*, I tell people when they ask, although technically speaking there was no real diving involved. Just a lot of drunk. I remember the day like it happened last week, even though it's been twenty-one years.

July in Mississippi is a godawful thing. The day starts heating up before seven in the morning, and by early afternoon the temperature is kissing-close to a hundred degrees. Humidity stays above eighty percent more often than not, and the still, hot air feels like a damp blanket draped over you. The pale blue sky is empty save the almost-white sun, glaring down like the eye of an angry god. The day I broke my back was one of those days.

Just a couple of miles outside of Starkville, where I grew up, the Old South Quarry cuts into the red clay cotton fields like an old battle scar. During the Great Depression the quarry did a booming business, harvesting limestone out of the bedrock to be crushed into gravel and powder for the concrete used by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the construction of structures all across the south. My grandfather was a down-on-his-luck welder and part-time farmer in those days, and spent two years building bridges for the Corps. It seemed like every time I went to church with them on a summer Sunday morning as a child, riding high in the front seat between them in their old green and white farm truck but still barely able to see over the dash, he had a new story to share about someone losing a finger or toe, hand or foot, during the construction of whatever bridge we happened to be crossing. Once he told me about a man buried alive in cement who, as far as he knew, was still encased down there at the base of the pylon holding up the bridge. He would've told me more, I think, but my grandmother shushed him up.

When the Depression ended and most people—my grandfather included—found permanent work, business fell off for the Old South Quarry. Limestone was cheaper coming out of Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee, and even though demand was up because of all the post-war construction, the supply from the more mountainous states far exceeded need. By the time I was tugged from my mother's womb, red-faced and screaming from the gross insult of birth, the quarry had been closed for nearly eighteen years and Starkville teenagers had been swimming there for ten.

On that sunny July day there were four of us piled into Kenny Wilcott's piece of shit Chevy Nova, roaring down the dirt road that circled around to the back of the quarry where the hole in the security fence was. Trigger Foster—his given name was Jonathan but he'd been Trigger to us ever since he shot himself in the foot on a duck hunt with his older brother when he was twelve—had filched a case of Milwaukee's Best from the stash his old man kept in the garage, and we were ready for a party. As much of a party four guys can have with twenty-four piss-warm beers and no girls, anyway.

Russ Howard pulled the first beer out of the plastic ring and handed it over to me. It felt like a mug of the Russian tea my mom made for me whenever I was sick. Even with the windows down, the car was an oven, but that didn't matter. We'd be cool soon enough.

The car hit a pothole and the four of us bounced as one.

"Goddammit, man, watch the road!" Trigger cried. He was sitting up front with Kenny, gripping the dash with both hands. Not long after the duck hunting incident, his older brother had been killed when he thought he could pass an eighteen-wheeler on a two-lane road and lost control of his Trans-Am. The car rolled six times, throwing Trigger's brother some thirty feet headfirst into a sweet gum tree. Trigger told us later that his head had been split in half right down the middle and most of his brain ended up in the crook of two branches, almost fifteen feet off the ground. He'd been jumpy in cars ever since, not that anyone could blame him.

"Relax, princess," Kenny said, but he eased up on the gas a little. He rubbed at the top of his head, which had banged into the roof when the car dipped. Kenny was on the junior varsity basketball team with me, and played center because he was so tall. Being several inches shorter—but not *short*, mind you—I played shooting guard. Between the two of us, we helped the team make it to the quarter-finals the previous year.

Ahead, I could see the rusted chain-link fence surrounding the quarry, and beyond it, the emerald lake sparkling in the summer sun, its color undiluted by the heat haze clinging to the ground. Limestone dust in the water gave it the unique color, reminiscent of exotic Caribbean locations. As we drew closer, I saw schools of bream and sunfish swimming lazily around the shallow edge. The quarry had been carved into the side of a small hillock, and toward the far end where the deep water darkened to near-black, a white stone cliff towered almost fifty feet above the surface. All that was visible of the old office at the top was a glint of glass through the kudzu overgrowth.

Kenny brought the car to a stop just outside the fence and shut it down. Drifts of red dust swirled around us, stirred up by our jostling drive. The air smelled of honeysuckle and the pesticide farmers soaked their cotton plants in to keep the boll weevils down to manageable levels. Out in the open green field, a symphony of grasshoppers crackled and rattled. Trigger relaxed visibly and held his hand over the seat for a beer.

I popped the tab on my own and got it to my mouth before it foamed all over the car, then gulped it down as fast as possible. We didn't bring it to sit around and sip it like the people in beer ads, after all. Pitching the can through the window into the tall grass, I opened the door to get out, but before I could, I let loose a massive belch. The sound rolled across the water like the crack of gunfire.

"Danny Mac sounds off!" Russ cawed, and pitched me another beer.

Danny Mac. It's been years since anyone called me that, except for my old buddy Jake Conrad—more on him in a bit—who did it occasionally when he was worked up about something. Usually the government. Maybe the nickname was kind of lame, no pun intended, but hell, who *isn't* lame at that age? No matter how pitiful it sounds now, it was far better than my given name of Daniel Edward Mackenzie. Doesn't that sound

stuffy and pretentious? Even now, as forty looms not too far around the corner, I'll take being called Danny over Daniel any day, though I prefer Dan. Nice, short, and simple.

But then? Then I was Danny Mac.

I drained the second beer almost as quickly as the first, and by the time we scrambled through the hole in the fence and down to the water's edge, my third was half empty. I was already starting to feel light-headed. We'd been down at the mall all morning, feeding quarters into games in the arcade and hanging out at Camelot Music, and hadn't bothered with lunch.

The dirt road we drove in on ended at a chained and padlocked gate, and turned to gravel inside the fence. It was the same one the loaded trucks used back when the quarry was in business, and it led right down into the water. Standing at the lake's edge, you could see the road continuing under the surface as it descended into the depths. To be honest, it always creeped me out a little to float over it and look down through my mask. It seemed so out of place down there, stretching into the murky darkness. A path to nowhere.

The pulverized gravel at the edge of the lake formed something of a beach, and that's where we spread out our towels. Trigger tied the remaining six-packs together with a piece of old clothesline from the trunk of the Nova and lowered them into the cool green water. We waded out four abreast, hissing reflexively first when the water touched our balls, then our armpits.

An hour later, snorkeling in the middle of the lake, I was as far from sober as I was from the shore. Through my mask I watched the fish and turtles glide far below me, dim dark shapes against the midnight green. From time to time I drifted over underwater meadows of some tall grass, gently swaying in the convection created by the sun's rays. Pale lime-colored tendrils reached for me out of the darkness like questing fingers, and I thought of dead things slowly rotting down there, just out of sight.

A scream yanked me from my quiet and morbid reflection, and I looked up in time to see Trigger twisting through the air halfway down the cliff. Though he grinned like a fool, his eyes were wide with terror. At the last second, he pulled his legs up and wrapped his arms around them, hitting the water butt-first in a perfect cannonball. The plume must have shot thirty feet.

Even as the displaced water rained back to the lake Kenny sailed over the edge. He jackknifed and greased in with barely any disturbance at all. Behind me, Russ hooted, and I turned to see him swimming back toward the beach in an awkward stroke somewhere between a dog paddle and a butterfly.

"Wait up!" I called, and started after him.

Trigger surfaced in the distance, sputtering and flailing and bellowing, "My ass! I broke my ass!"

Kenny's peal of laughter bounced off the vertical walls and doubled, then tripled, until it sounded like a mocking crowd. At the shore, Russ veered over and pulled two beers from the last six-pack, and we drank them as we picked and stumbled our way around the lake to the upper end. From the top of the hill we could see for miles, nothing but verdant green cotton plants against the carmine soil stretching out in every direction. I set my snorkel and mask on a chunk of limestone the size of a

suitcase near the precipice. M.C. Hammer's "U Can't Touch This" thundered from the boombox sitting with our towels, the sound surprisingly clear outside the enclosing rock sides. A gentle breeze blew in our faces, cooled by the water below. It carried a slightly metallic, clean smell. I gave Russ a dopey smile that was part indescribable happiness, part cheap beer.

"Last one in is queer," he shouted, and ran for the edge with me hot on his heels.

He sprung away from the drop, twisting around to look at me as he fell, a look of triumph on his face, an image frozen in my memory as the pure essence of summer and youth. I jumped after him, but just as I pushed off, my foot slid in the loose gravel, kicking out behind me like some kind of satirical ballet move, and I tumbled gracelessly over the edge.

The fall is imprinted in the archives of my mind as a series of snapshots taken as I somersaulted toward the water. White rock, speckled with black, far too close. The sky, impossibly blue. The lake, stretching off in the distance. Russ looking up at me, his mouth opening in a scream, Kenny and Trigger blurry smudges in the water beyond him. White rock. Blue sky.

When the workers carved away the hillside to harvest all that stone, they cut it away into a giant series of steps so that each one made a simple path across the face of the rock for them to use. One of those steps jutted out of the face of the cliff two feet below the waterline, forming a shelf six or seven feet wide. It's pure luck I didn't plunge headfirst into it and chum up the water with my fool brain. Instead, I hit the water on my back, part of me over the shelf and part over the abyss. Even through the roar in my ears I heard the brittle *crack!* of my spine as I impacted the edge just below my shoulder blades.

My eyes were open. I could see the disc of the sun through churning water turned cloudy by the lime silt, white and brilliant and uncaring. Even though I must have been going into shock, my mind was preternaturally alert and screamed for me to get to the surface before I drowned. It felt like someone had cinched a nail-studded belt around my midsection and was pulling it ever tighter, but compared to the pain that came later, it was nothing. I had a dim awareness that I no longer felt anything below that fiery circle.

I teetered there on the edge of the shelf for a second, then slipped over, pulled down by the weight of my dead legs. I sank in a dreamy kind of slow motion, desperately trying to use my arms to swim upward, but they didn't want to obey and merely flapped ineffectually. I grabbed at the rocky wall as it slid by, searching for purchase, but my fingers were twisted into claws and wouldn't open. I succeeded only in pulling loose a thick rubbery sheet of the pinkish fungal growth we called quarry skin. That stuff seemed to coat *everything* under the water, soft and slick like the sodden flesh of a bloated corpse.

Pressure built in my ears and lungs as I descended. I fell through a deepening green haze, no longer able to see the sun. No longer able to see much of anything but that single color, slowly bleeding away and leaving only blackness behind. I knew I was dying, but despite it all I felt a calming sense of peace build within me. I don't know if it was the beer, or God, or just my body starting to give up and shut down, but

I found that I wasn't so concerned about making the transition. Even though I was technically still a virgin.

I saw something gliding toward me through the gloom, one of God's angels coming with open arms to lead me home to heaven. Hot joy rose in my heart. They told me later it was just Russ, swimming down to catch me by the hair and drag me back up to the shelf.

My recollection of what happened next is hazy. I remember bits and pieces, little snippets of memory spliced together like a movie trailer made with only the worst parts. Lying in the cold water on the shelf, cradled in Russ's arms, shivering and telling him to stop crying like a little girl, then crying myself when the belt of pain twisted a little tighter. The sun as it slipped out of sight over the cliffs. The flat *whupwhupwhup* of the LifeFlight helicopter sent all the way from Jackson to get me after a pell-mell drive back to Starkville by Kenny and Trigger to find help. Dizziness from the rotation of the basket as they winched me up, and the feel of the warm rotor wash on my face, upper chest, and arms. Wonderment over why I couldn't feel it anywhere else.

The next solid memory is of waking up in a recovery room in Jackson General Hospital with my parents on one side of the bed and a strange man dressed in white on the other. Mom's eyes were red and watery, and Dad kept clearing his throat. That was the first time they ever looked old to me.

"Welcome back, Danny," the stranger said. "My name is Dr. Feinbaum. Do you know where you are?"

My throat hurt like hell, dry and scratchy like someone took a steel wool pad to it, so I whispered, "Hospital."

"That's right, you're down in Jackson, in the intensive care unit. Do you remember what happened?"

I nodded.

"Good," he told me, and looked up at my parents. "Very good. Short term memory loss is always a concern in cases like this."

Reaching into the breast pocket of his jacket, he plucked out a pen and held it in front of my face. "Follow this with your eyes, please."

I tracked the movement of the pen and wondered why I wasn't in more pain.

Especially below that spot near my shoulder blades, where I landed.

Sample Chapter:

**Maxfield Anderson's Field Guide to Vampires  
Book I: Vampirus**

**by Jarret Liotta**

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"It's gonna be about two minutes," they told me, and I did not feel ready to go on.

I don't know how many of you have ever been on television, but there's a lot of fanfare happening before you even start. There's literally an army of assistants and producers and people who move you from one room to another, like you're some kind of prop. They get you all prepped and primed, primped and proper for your appearance—physically, mentally and emotionally—and by the time they're done you feel like well-groomed Pekinese entering a dog show.

Of course, in this instance, it wasn't exactly a supportive kind of mental and emotional preparation.

"So, you *really* believe this shit about vampires?" some stagehand asked me as I waited in the last room—the "green" room, they called it, even though it was blue—before my entry.

"Yes. Yes, I do, because I've seen them."

He laughed. "Oh, really," and he laughed again.

"They're real, my friend, and you'd be surprised how many there are, and how many different kinds inhabit the United States alone."

I could tell from his grin he didn't believe me.

"It's true," I commanded like a little kid, (though a voice inside me regretted—for the thousandth time in my life—falling into defense of myself against an idiot).

"And so, like, did you ever *kill* a vampire by putting a stake in his heart?" he tittered more, the fool.

"I've killed vampires, yes, but only in self-defense, or to keep someone else from harm. I'm a naturalist. I don't believe in killing any kind of life form if I don't have to. Vampires have as much right to live as any of us, provided they don't present a danger to the population."

"It's time!" a slender, hyper woman with a clipboard interrupted us. "You're on. Come on."

She led me out to the edge of a brightly lit stage, where the host—Chet Collins—was seated at a big desk, about to introduce me.

"Geez," that stupid stagehand said, following me to the edge. "You're gonna be great. Just tell 'em some of those stories about killing vampires and you'll bring down the house."

And so I did ... And continue to do so ...

The very first time I saw a vampire was in New Mexico.

I'd gone there on a long weekend to study desert iguana. I was still at Princeton University at the time, working on my master's in evolutionary biology. But this was more of a naturalist's vacation than official study work. Even then, I'd begun to see the limits of traditional academic research, as opposed to extensive study in the field.

I flew into Tucson and met my friend Paul, who lived there. We drove out on the I-10 toward Las Cruces. Paul, who worked as a counselor in a drug rehab, wasn't that interested in animal behavior, but he liked to camp and we were looking forward to a couple of beautiful nights in the high desert.

The first night was uneventful, save some great photos I got of a coyote crossing near our camp. Late that second night, however—about 3 a.m., early Sunday morning actually—I saw something I just could not explain.

I probably wouldn't have been looking in that direction, except the snorting of a javelina—a desert boar—caught my ear.

"Hear that?" I whispered. "Javelina, I think."

"Wild pig," Paul reiterated, trying to seem more interested than he was, especially at 3 a.m.

I had my night vision binoculars mounted low on a tripod nearby. I crawled over and trained them toward the scrub, where I figured the javelina was rooting around, perhaps looking for some of the prickly pear cactus they like to eat ...

And there he was—a young boar, or collared peccary, as they're known—a short, stout swine about three feet long, sticking his snout into the scrub, maybe 50 feet away from us.

"Look at that," I whispered, forgetting Paul had no real view in the dark.

"Cool," he said after a long pause that told me he was nodding off.

"Look at him foraging." I spoke softly, knowing I was talking to myself now. "That's a teenager, I'd say, judging by the size, and a male, of course, judging by that dangling participle."

I didn't hear anything else making any sounds, and let me tell you, it was quiet.

The javelina apparently didn't hear anything either. It didn't even flinch before, suddenly, that creature was upon it.

I watched the whole thing. It was a small vampire, of the variety I'd later identify as a "bat" because of those extremely wide shoulders and kind of wing-like arms.

At the time, however, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what it was. At first I thought it might have been a small puma, in part because the bulging muscles on its back and shoulders were formidable. But I'd really never seen anything like it.

I'd been studying animals for many years already at that point—since I was a kid, in fact—but I just couldn't comfortably wrap my head around what this could be.

Lithe and sinewy, it just seemed to drop out of the sky and simply wrap itself around that poor, unsuspecting pig.

The javelina barely gave a snort before the vamp had its teeth stuck deep in its neck. It bucked and jumped and tried to run, but it didn't get very far.

The vampire clung to it with no effort. The javelina quivered and quickly went down.

I still had them in my sight. And what a sight it was.

"Paul!" I whispered urgently. "Paul, get up."

He didn't hear me.

I couldn't really tell what color it was in the dark, but I almost reckoned it to be a dull, damp greenish-grey. It had no fur, or no hair. Instead it was covered with a taught, grey, ugly skin.

The oddest thing was, as I watched it, I came to see it was basically humanoid in form—about four-feet tall, apparently bipedal, with two strong legs and those two wing-like arms with the knobby elbows.

It remained mounded on the downed javelina, sucking its blood with little excess movement. I couldn't see its face as it gorged itself with such concentration, but from the back I saw it had a large head.

Most of all I was struck by how muscular it looked, like a shaved panther, with enormous strong shoulders that kept its wing-like arms glued down upon that poor pig's shoulders and back.

It all happened very fast. I took it all in in just a few fast seconds. But before it was finished, that creature made a sound that stays with me to this day—a short, shrilled shriek combined with a kind of gurgling moan. At the time I couldn't decide if it indicated the pleasure of feasting or the rush of a conquest. Short and quick, it shocked across the night.

"Paul!" I urged. "Get up. Hurry up. Get up."

Paul stirred then. "What's up?" he whispered stupidly.

"Look at this! Hurry up."

And that's when it heard me, because it looked up, right at me. I'll never forget its eyes, glowing like gold in the dark. It was almost a man's face in that moment, though the features were feral—the nose flat and wide, the mouth that of a ravaging predator with a hint of sharp canines protruding from its panting mouth. I saw then how its head tapered down toward a short snout, almost appearing like a bald bear, or perhaps like an enormous bat.

It surveyed me for just an instant. Somehow I knew it could see me clearer than I could ever see it in this black night. Its expression was so flat, while its eyes glowed with a fire like hell.

It licked at its lips with a very quick, long tongue—very bat-like. There was no light to speak of, but somehow I was able to discern the shine of the glistening blood smeared around its mouth. It sparkled wet and grim.

It stayed absolutely frozen, surveying me for what felt like the longest moment, but was probably just seconds.

The times I've known real terror were all alive in that moment. As comfortable as I'd grown in my research of the animal kingdom, even at night, as often as I'd encountered strange and savage animals of all varieties, and sometimes even found myself in hazardous conditions and potentially dangerous situations where wild animals were concerned ... never, *never*, had I ever felt the gut-shaking fear and mystifying shock of meeting that creature's eyes that night on the desert. Like legend, it seemed to look into my soul. I was entranced and naked, standing helpless in that still, black night. My legs and body began to tremble from a fear so deep within, I felt I might die in that very instant.

This is the power a vampire can wield. Though I didn't recognize it at the time, it was the first clue that these mysterious creatures defy ordinary classification within the biological world.

Then, as suddenly as it had dropped upon the now-dead animal, this small, primordial vampire simply bounded off and disappeared out of sight. It moved so quickly, I could not even tell you which direction it took, though I was watching it the whole time.

And as suddenly as it had disappeared, of its own accord, my terror subsided, as if a light had been turned on and all the imaginary things of darkness were instantaneously obliterated.

"What is it?" I heard Paul say from right beside me.

He leaned into the binoculars as I dumbly leaned away, still steadying my body from those intense moments before.

"Whoa! Look at that," he said.

"Is it there?" I barked, as a sweep of terror returned, thinking he meant this vampire had come back.

"Yeah, but is it dead?"

"What? What? The—" I pushed him aside and looked again, but all I saw was the wild boar lying still on the ground.

"What happened? Did it die? Did you see what happened?" he asked.

For many seconds all I could do was shake my head. I didn't know what I had seen, or what it was that had made me feel so terrible, so absolutely frightened.

It would be a long time before I even began to understand what it was I had experienced.

But this was my first encounter with a real live vampire.

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# **CONTAMINATION**

**BOOK ZERO**

**BY T. W. PIPERBROOK**

Contamination Book Two: Crossroads  
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Thanks to my friends and family, who have supported and inspired me. Special thanks to my Aunt Gaye Hooper—a fellow dreamer.

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# ABOUT CONTAMINATION: ZERO

The infection starts with Frank, one of the locals at the town bar. In just a few hours, it has consumed the entire town.

Dan Lowery, one of only four police officers in St. Matthews, soon realizes he is no match for the impending destruction. Violence and bloodshed litter the streets, and the infected roam freely. No one is safe here—not even his family.

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# EPITAPH

*To those we have loved, those we have lost, and those we hold onto.*

*In Loving Memory JAD 1922—2012*

## PART ONE — THE LAST SUPPER

**T**HE PRISONER LUNGED THROUGH THE bars and grabbed hold of Dan Lowery's collar.

"When I get out of here, this game is over!" he shrieked, eyes bloodshot and bulging.

Dan reached for his holster, but thought better of it. He wrenched his shirt free instead, and leapt back a few feet. He cursed himself silently for getting too close to the cell. The prisoner glared at him, jaw hanging open, his pupils wide and distorted. His speech was slurred, and his breath reeked of another night wasted at the bar. His bald head captured the bright lights of the jail cell, reflecting the glare back off his scalp.

Dan fingered the badge on his chest and lifted it up so the prisoner could see. "You pull that shit again, and I'll have you charged with assaulting a police officer. You hear me, Frank?"

Frank wasn't listening. He was busy pacing around the cell, and had probably already forgotten what had just transpired. He clutched his stomach and bent over the cell bench, dry heaving.

Dan unfolded his sleeves. He had rolled them up prior to transporting the man from cruiser to cell. There was always a fight to be had with this one, and he was getting damn tired of it.

This time, it had been a dispute over the television station at The Down Under. Frank had insisted the barkeep change the channel so he could watch the boxing match. One of the other locals had resisted, claiming he wanted to catch the weather first. A verbal altercation had ensued, culminating in Frank tripping over his barstool and landing flat on his back. He had screamed and ranted, and had finally been detained by several other patrons. Dan had arrived shortly after, dodging the man's vomit as he hauled him into the back of the cruiser.

This wasn't the life he had envisioned when joining the police force. At the same time, he wasn't sure what more to expect from a small town in Arizona. With a population of only a few thousand, St. Matthews had little room in the budget for reinforcements. Dan was one of only four police officers.

He moved through the small station, heading towards a locker room down the hall from the jail cell. He could still hear Frank coughing and spewing behind him.

"You'd think you would have learned your lesson by now, Frank," he mumbled.

"Fuck you!" the man screamed from the other room. Dan had forgotten how sound carried in the hollow building.

He entered the locker room, already unbuttoning his shirt. It had been a long day, and he was ready to knock off for the evening. Officer Howard Barrett was already suiting up, ready to relieve him of his duties. Howard was the station's senior officer.

"You mean I have to watch this joker all night? What the fuck, man?" Howard rolled his eyes, suppressing a laugh.

"Better you than me!" Dan retorted, hanging his shirt in his locker.

The dispatcher had already left for the day. After hours, all calls were routed through a regional office in a neighboring town. Howard would be alone with the prisoner for the rest of the evening.

The senior officer buttoned his uniform over his chest, covering a scar on his left shoulder. He was originally from California. In his eight years of service on the Sacramento streets, the officer had been shot twice, each time refusing desk duty. The scar was one of two on his body—the other was on his

calf. Dan had seen them plenty of times. His comrade took pleasure in reliving the stories, showing his wounds with pride to anyone who would listen.

It was a far cry from herding the local drunks into a cell for the evening.

"So what's Julie got on the burner for you?"

"Word on the street is ham and boiled potatoes." Dan smiled. Oftentimes, he would invite the officer to join them when they both had the night off.

"Ah, an Irish feast! Well, enjoy it man. I'm sure I won't feel like eating much after watching Frank throw up in there."

Howard slammed the locker shut, and the door rattled through the small room. Although he was only five foot nine, he had the build of a football player, making up for his lack of height with a thick, rugged frame.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Dan said.

From the other room, Frank continued to dry heave, and Dan chuckled softly.

"Good luck with that one."



Dan walked across the parking lot, feeling the cool breeze ruffle through his curly blonde hair. His face reddened as the Arizona heat hit his pores. He wiped his arm across his face and felt the perspiration moisten his skin.

He was exhausted. After a long day at work, he was looking forward to spending time with his wife and daughter. On a typical day, they would bring out some of the board games they had tucked in the closet, or enjoy a relaxing walk in the yard. He hoped today was no different.

He looked down at his cellphone, preparing for it to ring at any minute. Julie was punctual, and she'd be expecting him shortly. Within a few seconds, the phone lit up. He laughed to himself.

"Hello?"

"What's so funny?" Julie demanded, but he could hear that she was in a good mood.

"Nothing, honey. I just knew you'd be calling. Right on time, as usual!" he kidded, reaching for his car keys.

"I've got your favorite meal on the stove. Quinn even helped with the potatoes."

"I can't wait! I'll be there shortly."

"I love you," she said.

He hung up and inserted his key in the car door. The police vehicle was a 2006 Ford Crown Victoria. Given the size of St. Matthews, the town's officers normally used their patrol cars as their primary mode of transportation. In the event of an emergency, they would be expected to spring into action at a moment's notice.

Dan had rarely been required to do so. He kept his radio by the bedside table, just in case, but he couldn't remember the last time it had woken him from sleep.

He often caught Julie staring at it before going to bed. He imagined she was having a silent chat with the device, warning it to stay silent.

Dan pulled out of the lot and into the roadway. He lived within 3 miles of the station, which provided a quick commute from work to home. Because of this, he used the time to unwind—to transition from his rugged exterior as a police officer into his role as father and husband.

He loved his position on the force, but Julie and Quinn were his main focus—the reason he woke up in the morning.

Dan navigated the streets with ease. It hadn't taken him long to gain familiarity with St. Matthews. In fact, there weren't many streets that he didn't know. The city roads were well maintained, featuring a mixture of commercial and residential properties. In between them, small shrubs peppered the dusty landscape, constant reminders of the desert backdrop.

The White Mountains surrounded the town on all sides. A frequent destination for Arizona tourists, they provided a makeshift border, sheltering St. Matthews from the neighboring towns and insulating them from the worries of big city life.

Dan rounded a corner, heading away from the center of town and into one of the residential neighborhoods. Here, houses began to dominate the roadside, and he relaxed slightly. He was a few blocks from home when his cellphone rang.

He glanced at the display, expecting to see his wife's name. Instead, he saw Howard's.

"Hey, man. Want me to save you a plate of potatoes?" He grinned.

"Dan?" Howard's voice wavered.

For a split second, it sounded like the reception had been lost. A deep breath from the other end told him that his friend was still on the line.

"Are you still there?" Dan asked.

"Frank's dead."

The words rang in the air. Dan stared at the phone in disbelief.

"What happened?"

"Can you come back to the station?" Howard begged.

In his five years on the force, it was the first time he had heard his friend rattled.

"I'll be right there," he said, closing the phone.

He threw on his sirens and raced back into town.

H

OWARD MET HIM AT THE station door. The front of his shirt was covered in sweat, and he looked visibly upset. His usually stocky frame seemed to be shrunken, as if he was trying to disappear into his clothes.

"Are you ok?" Dan asked.

"I think so," Howard said, but his demeanor said otherwise.

"Where is he?"

"In the cell. I covered him with a blanket. I called the paramedics, but it sounded like they'd be a while."

Dan was hit by a pang of fear, but he wasn't sure why. His friend was making him nervous. He hurried through the door and down the hall to where Frank had been kept. As he proceeded, he half-expected to hear the prisoner still cursing, spilling the contents of his stomach onto the jail floor.

Instead, the station was eerily quiet.

Howard hung behind him, as if afraid of what his friend might find.

"I've never seen anything like this," he said.

Dan entered the main room, feeling his heartbeat quicken in his chest. In the center of the cell, a bulky figure was covered in a blue blanket. For a second, he imagined that Frank was hiding somewhere in the station; that the lump under the blanket was a decoy, and that the prisoner would come lunging at them from the shadows.

*Pull yourself together*, he thought.

He tugged on the cell door, but it was locked. He reached for his keys.

He stopped when he noticed a trickle of dried blood on one of the iron bars. The fluid had made its way down the side of the cell, forming a pool at the bottom.

"What the fuck?" He stepped back.

"He attacked me, Dan. I was lucky to get out of the room alive."

Howard motioned towards his arm. The officer's shirt was torn at the elbow, and a red stain blossomed towards his bicep. Dan was surprised he hadn't noticed it before.

"Howard, you're hurt! What the hell happened?"

"He took a chunk out of my arm, man. I thought he was going to rip it off." Howard covered his face with his good hand.

Dan drew his gun. He inserted the key into the lock, watching for any sign of movement through the bars, his finger on the trigger of the pistol. The blanket remained still on the floor.

"Stay back," he warned, stepping inside.

Dan crossed the cell towards the body, and immediately gagged. A puddle of Frank's vomit lay under the steel bench. If circumstances were different, he might have found it amusing.

He nudged the blanket with his foot, expecting Frank to grab onto it in a drunken rage. The figure remained stiff. He bent down slowly, grabbing the edge of the fabric, and slid it off a few inches. It dragged slightly, caught on a piece of flesh that looked like the prisoner's ear.

Dan recoiled in fear. Frank's face was demolished: his bare head was split open at the center. His shiny round head had become a red canvas, painted with a mural of blood and exposed bone. His nose was splintered into fragments, and his mouth dangled open, held together by a few pieces of teeth and loose gum. His eyes were rolled up into his head. They were pitch black.

"He was reaching for the water cooler. It looked like he was thirsty. I went to give him a cup—you know, to be nice," Howard eyed his friend, as if afraid he wouldn't believe him. "And then he grabbed me, man! When I broke free, he went crazy. He kept smashing his head against the bars, over and over, trying to get to me, until his face just...oh Jesus fuck!"

Howard shook his head from side to side, trying to keep his composure. The senior officer had been shot twice—and had survived some of the toughest neighborhoods in California—but tonight he had finally cracked.

"Did you see his eyes?" Howard waved his good arm towards the cell. "What the fuck could have happened to him?"

Dan replaced the blanket, feeling his stomach tighten. He stepped back, bumping into an object on the floor. A plastic cup rolled away from him and came to rest underneath the bench.

In his five years on the force, this was one of the most violent deaths he had ever seen. Dan was worried.



Mickey Sonstrom arrived on the scene first, even before the ambulance. He was fair-skinned and freckled, sporting a tuft of red hair that crept out from underneath his police hat. His chin pointed outwards, as if to constantly reaffirm his position of authority. At twenty-two, he was the youngest officer on the force.

"Howard, what'd you do, man?" he kidded, punching the stocky officer on the arm. "Oh shit, man, I didn't know you were hurt. Are you all right?"

"It's not funny, Mickey," Dan scolded him, "Howard is lucky to be alive."

"Is Frank really dead?"

"Yes, he is. We should wait for Sheriff Turner before we do anything."

The red-haired officer peered over their shoulders into the cell, catching a glimpse of the blue blanket. Dan had placed it back over the body, both to preserve the evidence and to avoid looking at it again. Over the past few years, there had been a few gruesome deaths in St. Matthews, but nothing to this extent.

Mickey headed off into the locker room.

"I'll get the camera," he said.

Howard sat behind the wooden desk in the room, applying pressure to his wound. They had raided the emergency kit in the station and wrapped his arm with gauze and a bandage while waiting for the paramedics. Dan was sure the man would need stitches.

Frank had sliced into a piece of the man's upper bicep, presumably with his nails. Dan struggled to figure out how the prisoner had done so much damage—especially without a weapon.

"I should call my wife," Dan said. "She's probably worried."

"Why don't you go home, man—have dinner with the family," Howard offered.

"Absolutely not. I'll tell her not to wait up."

Dan retrieved his phone and walked into the corridor. The sound of his footsteps bounced off the station walls as he dialed the number. His wife picked up on the first ring.

"Dan, where are you?" Julie said. "I thought you'd be home already."

"We had an accident at the station, honey. Howard's been hurt. He'll be ok—but there is an incident that I need to deal with."

"Oh my God. I knew it. Will you be home soon?"

"I don't think so," he said. "In fact, I'm pretty sure it will be a while."

"I'll wait up for you. I can heat up dinner when you get back."

Dan smiled, feeling a sense of relief at the sound of her voice. Howard was still alive. Julie and Quinn were safe at home, miles away from the carnage he had just witnessed. Things could be much worse.

"That sounds great. If you guys get hungry, feel free to start without me," he said. Dan doubted he would have much of an appetite.

He hung up the cellphone and stared at his reflection in the glass. His adrenaline was still flowing, and he tried to steady his hands. The ambulance would be here soon, and they would need to assess the crime scene. He tried to regain his composure. From somewhere outside, a car door slammed shut. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and adjusted his hat.

Even before he had a visual, Dan heard his boss breathing from the parking lot outside. A few seconds later, the door swung open with a *crash*, and Sheriff Turner's massive figure filled the entrance. He lumbered down the hall towards Dan, his massive legs shaking the ground beneath him.

"Is Howard ok?" he asked.

"I think he'll be fine," Dan assured him. "But he'll need stitches."

The Sheriff muttered something and wiped away a stream of sweat from beneath his cap. His short white hair was matted into clumps, and his thick black eyebrows quivered with worry. Labored breaths wracked his body. Dan figured it had probably been a while since the man had moved so fast. By all accounts, his boss was sorely out of shape. However, his intentions were some of the purest that Dan had ever known.

Sheriff Turner had taken over the position from Bill Turner, his father, who had retired after forty years on the force. The family had occupied St. Matthews for generations, each member holding a career in public service. Almost anywhere the sheriff went he was greeted by warmth and respect. He once joked that his body belonged to the townsfolk. Dan thought he should have been a politician in another life.

The sheriff's red cheeks puffed in front of him, and he resumed walking.

"Thank God he's all right," he said. "Where the hell are the medics?"



It was after 9 o'clock when Dan finally left the police station. At that point, there wasn't much more he could do. Howard had been taken to the hospital to be stitched up, insisting that his co-workers stay behind. Dan had completed the necessary paperwork; the three remaining officers had documented the scene.

Frank's mangled body had been taken to the morgue shortly after. The coroner, Jonas Cutler, hadn't offered much of an explanation. Even with an autopsy, he explained, it would be impossible to gauge the man's motives. For now, he was chalking it up to a stomach full of alcohol and a bad temper.

Dan pulled out of the parking lot. He contemplated calling his wife. Given the late hour, he decided against it. In the event his family had gone to sleep, he didn't want to wake them—though he was certain Julie would be up, waiting for him.

As he sped home, he tried to picture the plate of re-heated potatoes and ham that awaited him, but only succeeding in conjuring up images of Frank's missing face. He blinked hard a few times, trying to



get a grip on his stomach. Work was work, and home was home. He kept reminding himself of that fact. A few minutes later, he pulled into the driveway.

The Lowery residence was a quaint, single-story home situated on a slightly wooded lot. The front lower half was comprised of red brick, the upper made of white wood panels. Two elm trees sat in the front yard, providing a nice contrast to the desert backdrop. On the right side of the house was a two-car garage.

Dan felt above the visor for the garage remote, and then reconsidered, parking the cruiser where he had pulled in.

He'd leave the garage doors closed, just in case they were asleep.

He exited the vehicle, locking the car door and starting up the walkway. A dim light was on in the dining room. He felt a sense of relief wash over him. It was good to be home.

HOWARD WINCED AS THE NURSE threaded the first stitch. The pain was actually quite bearable, but he wasn't a fan of needles. He looked away and concentrated on a diagram on the wall. A row of letters and numbers lined the poster, each varying in size and shape.

"Can you read all of them?" The nurse smiled at him. She was a cute blonde, probably no more than twenty-eight, if he had to guess.

"Let's see, A, F, G. Yep—got 'em all." He grinned, flexing his bicep.

"You'll have to stay still, sir."

"No problem, ma'am," he said.

Howard thought back to the last time he had been in the hospital, back in Sacramento. That was when he had received the gunshot wound to his calf. Now, that was some scary shit. *This is nothing*, he reminded himself. *Nothing at all.*

He should've known better than to go near Frank's cell. He'd known something was going to happen tonight.

He closed his left eye and tried reading the letters on the chart backwards. He realized that the patients who took the test were probably farther away, but it felt good to practice nonetheless. Howard was on a constant quest for perfection, always striving to keep his mind and body active.

He closed both eyes as the needle wove in and out of his arm. He could feel a steady pinching even though he had been given an anesthetic. He pictured his arm slowly coming back together, and tried to dispel the image of Frank's face coming apart.

"All set!" the nurse said, standing up proudly.

Howard wondered how many stitches she had given before. From the look in her eyes, she was quite impressed with the work she had done.

"Looks good!" he confirmed, but figured he wouldn't have known the difference either way.

The nurse beamed and began to put away her supplies.

"Hey, if you ever get bored, I work at the precinct downtown," he said. "You should stop by. Ask for Howard."

"Definitely!" She smiled, but her blue eyes remained on the equipment. A few seconds later, she handed him a sheet of paper. "All of your post-care instructions are listed here on the bottom. We'll see you in two weeks to remove the stitches."

Howard thanked her and slid off the chair. He retrieved his cap from the table, and exited into the hallway.

The emergency room waiting area was surprisingly quiet. Two rows of red plastic chairs lined the walls, all of them empty but for a few magazines that had been left on the seats. Behind the front desk, an older woman sat with her back to the room, scribbling away on some paperwork.

A television hung from the ceiling, displaying the local newscast. The sound was barely audible, but Howard could make out the story from the tagline below. The reporter was covering the town's yearly festival. Several residents had planted a variety of trees on the center green. The caption switched a few seconds later to an alert on a recall of ground beef.

"I could go for a burger," he mumbled to himself, wishing he were hungry. He exited through the automatic doors and back into the night.



Howard drove aimlessly for a few hours, rounding the streets of St. Matthews in the police cruiser. He should probably go home, but home felt like the wrong place to be. For a second, he considered calling Dan, perhaps stopping in for some ham and potatoes, but thought better of it.

There was no time for that now.

A glimmer of pain rippled up his arm, and he loosened his grip on the steering wheel.

For a Friday night, the streets were unusually empty. Normally, he would find himself stuck behind some drunk who was driving far less than the speed limit, painfully aware of the cruiser behind him. Tonight, he was greeted by nothing more than the traffic lights and an occasional foot traveler.

Howard circled the town several times before he realized where he was headed. He pulled into a small side street tucked in the commercial center of town and turned off his headlights. A row of brick buildings loomed overhead, the adobe cracked and worn from both time and lack of concern. A few patrons were standing in the alleyway, but quickly dispersed when they saw the patrol car. He noticed that one of them pointed in his direction. It looked like he mouthed the officer's name.

Above them, a dingy sign garnished one of the doorways, adding a faint orange glow to the alley. Howard looked up at it. *The Down Under*.

Normally, a trip to the bar would have been under the pretext of violence—an alcohol-fueled fight, a gun scare, or perhaps a drug overdose. Tonight, he had been drawn to the place for another reason.

On any given night, Frank would have still been here, raising his glass to anything that struck his fancy, and raising his fists at everything else. Howard closed his eyes, breathing in the smell of warm beer and stale urine. If he listened intently enough, he was almost certain he could hear the dead man's voice, yelling from inside.

After a few minutes, he opened his eyes and stared out the window. A few of the locals had gathered in front of the bar and were pointing and whispering at him. He sat upright, instinctively feeling for his pistol.

One of them held a bottle in his hand and staggered a few steps toward the vehicle. Howard recognized him as one of the locals—Nathan Heid. "What's the matter, you pigs come to arrest another one of us? One man isn't enough for the night? You fucking assholes."

Howard winced at the insult. He could easily arrest the man on several charges, but tonight he had much more important things to do. Nathan leered at him, preening a scruffy white beard. "Yeah, that's right. You got nothin' to say now, huh?"

The others cheered, laughing and holding up their bottles.

Howard started the engine and put the car into drive, trying his best to appear unfazed. He sped off down the alley, feeling utterly alone.

**D**ALE STARTED UP THE WALKWAY, and then stopped. He glanced back at the police cruiser, which was immersed in shadow at the foot of the driveway. The motion light over his garage must have gone out. He cursed silently and walked back towards the vehicle, intending to pull it into the garage. From the looks of it, Julie and Quinn were both still up, so he wouldn't be disturbing them.

He hopped back in the car and tapped the overhead garage remote. The door ascended, and he flicked on his headlights. Inside, a neat array of garden tools hung on the walls—shovels, rakes, pitchforks—along with neatly stacked bags of potting soil and plant fertilizer on the floor. His wife had always had a green thumb. If Dan so much as looked at a plant, it would disintegrate.

He pulled the cruiser into the garage, next to his wife's Subaru Outback. It appeared she hadn't been out today. Normally he could tell by the position of the vehicle. From his job on the force, Dan had inherited an eye for detail. He was often expected to recall facts and conversations in his reports, and he prided himself on his accuracy.

Dan turned off the headlights and tapped the garage remote. He heard the door descend behind him, and checked quickly in his rearview to make sure no one had slipped inside. You could never be too careful. Especially after the night he'd just had.

A few months back, he had responded to a burglary call just outside the city center. Apparently, the suspect had waited outside an elderly woman's home, and then followed her inside through the garage. The perpetrator had then bound and gagged her, before making off with all her valuables. The poor woman had been so shaken up that she had moved into a group home shortly afterwards. Dan couldn't blame her. It was a shame what the world had come to.

He exited the vehicle and made his way to the door. He could hear the television from inside. He turned the handle and stepped into the kitchen, expecting Julie to be there, waiting for him. Instead, he was met with silence. He placed his keys on the countertop.

"Julie, I'm home!" he called out.

The kitchen was in disarray. Pots and pans were strewn across the countertop. A cutting board spilled over with potato skins, and wet towels were draped over the edge of the sink. Julie was normally a neat freak, cleaning her dishes almost immediately after she used them. This wasn't like her. His gaze continued down the counter.

The microwave door had been left open, revealing a splattering of food on the inside. A display of knives was turned sideways next to it. One of them—the largest—was missing. Dan started forward and felt his foot hit a roll of paper towels that had unraveled on the floor.

"Julie?"

Through the kitchen, past an arched doorway, he had a partial view of the dining room. Although the chandelier was lit, it cast only a dull aura over the table, as if the dimmer had been placed on the lowest setting. His wife sat at the head of the table at the end closest to him, her back turned.

"You ok? I'm sorry I'm late."

She didn't answer. Dan felt his heart start to hammer behind his ribcage, and his police instincts kicked into gear. He imagined the worst—that someone was waiting for him on the other side of the

dining room, forcing his wife to remain silent. From his position, he could only see half of the table. Quinn was nowhere in sight.

His fingertips grazed the gun, but he didn't remove it. Not yet.

He crept past the refrigerator, hugging the side of the room. Slowly, the dining room revealed itself to him. The other chairs were empty; the table was set for three. A whiff of steam rose from the plate in front of Julie, indicating that she had recently heated the food. She was alone.

"Honey, did Quinn go to bed already?" he whispered.

Her neck twitched slightly at the words, and he could see her chest rise and fall. Whatever had happened—was happening—she was alive.

He weaved around her chair until her face came into view, still fingering his holster. Her long brown hair was tied in a ponytail, but several strands had made their way out of the elastic and across her face. Her round lips were pursed, and her high cheeks held a faint red glow. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were folded in her lap.

"Are you asleep?"

The TV blared from the other room, but his wife did not make a sound. A few bites were missing from the plate in front of her. The fork was on the floor by her feet.

"Honey..." he tried again, softly.

A *bang* erupted from down the hall. Dan jumped and withdrew his gun. There were two doors beyond the dining room, one on either side. The one on the left was open, and he could see their queen-size bed through the crack. The door across the hall—the one leading to Quinn's bedroom—was shut.

Dan edged sideways down the hallway, keeping one eye on his wife. From the other room, the TV went to commercial, increasing in volume. An announcer spoke of the revolutionary power of a new toilet spray. The rest of the house maintained its silence.

He reached the door and pressed his ear against it. A thin scratching sound emanated from the other side, a few feet below his head. It was about where his daughter's shoulders would be.

He cupped one hand to the door. "Quinn...are you in there?"

*Boom!* The door wobbled as something crashed against it, knocking his hand from the frame. Someone began to pound on the other side, and he heard the person whimpering. It sounded like his daughter, but he couldn't be sure. Dan held the doorknob, turning it slightly to test it. The door was locked. He looked down at the keyhole, but no key was present. It had been locked from the hallway.

His eyes darted back to the dining room table. His wife had not moved, but her eyes were now open. She stared at him vacantly, her lips still pursed together. Her pupils had turned black.

Something glimmered from the table, next to her plate. It was the key to his daughter's room.



Dan made a lunge for the key, and then stopped short. His wife sat motionless, piercing him with hollow eyes. He wondered if she was able to see him—to recognize the man standing before her. Everything about her was horribly wrong.

"Julie, our daughter is locked in her room. We need to get her out," he said. "Do you hear me?"

Her hands remained in her lap, and when he looked down, he could just make out the shiny blade of the kitchen knife. She didn't answer him. What the hell was going on?

Dan reached for the key, closed his hand around it. In the background, the banging had increased in volume, echoing through the hallway and drowning out the TV.

"Quinn, honey, I'm coming!" he shouted behind him.

Julie's hand flew up suddenly, clutching the knife, and she rammed it down, lodging the blade deep in the tabletop. Dan withdrew his hand, but the tip of the blade caught on one of his knuckles, tearing it open. The key clattered to the floor.

"Julie—it's me!" he screamed in pain, watching a crease open in his skin. Blood began to ooze from his finger. He reached for his handcuffs, hoping to restrain her, but he'd already changed his clothes at the station and he'd left them in the car.

He jumped back, aiming his pistol at her. Julie had risen to her feet. She wore a mid-length white sundress, and she held the blade to her chest against it. Dan watched a splotch of blood—*his blood*—expand and stain the fabric.

She walked toward him, her chest butting up against the pistol, and raised the knife in the air for another blow. He batted at it with the gun, connecting with the steel blade, but she kept her grip.

Then, before he could react, Julie leapt forward and sliced. Dan fell backwards, his wife on top of him.

He grabbed hold of her wrist, catching knife and arm at bay, and looked into her face, hoping she would recognize him. Her cheeks were red with blush, the color evenly applied on both sides. Whatever had happened to her, it must have been recent. *I just talked to her a few hours earlier, for God's sake*, he thought. Her eyes were black ovals, penetrating past Dan and etching invisible holes into the floor.

In the background, the banging had lessened. He wondered if Julie had locked their daughter in her own room for her own protection, before the violent urges had taken her over—to stop from killing her own daughter.

"Julie, please stop this," he pleaded.

Her mouth opened, and he noticed bits of food were stuck in her teeth, as if she'd forgotten how to chew. She pushed harder, grunting as she leaned into the knife. It was the first sound she had made since his arrival.

Somewhere in his pocket, Dan's cellphone began to ring. He blinked away his tears and tried to stop his wife from stabbing him.

**H**OWARD DROVE AIMLESSLY, TRYING TO lose himself in the streets of St. Matthews. He rolled down the window, letting the cool mountain breeze seep into the vehicle, and contemplated having a cigarette.

Howard hadn't smoked in almost ten years. In his twenties, he had maintained a solid pack-a-day habit, lighting up whenever the desire struck him. At the time, he had little concern for the future. He'd been in college then, and life was as simple as passing a few courses at Sacramento State University—just enough to keep him enrolled. At night his real life began: hitting the bars with his friends, playing pool, and chasing the young women that matriculated at the local college. Things had changed rapidly when his mother had fallen ill.

Howard had been home for a visit when she had told him. The doctors had diagnosed her with lung cancer. According to the test results, the disease was already in the advanced stages. She'd been coughing up blood for several weeks before going to the doctor, and a CAT scan had revealed the news. She hadn't even been a smoker. Howard was devastated.

For the next two years, he watched her deteriorate rapidly, losing the strength to walk and eventually becoming bed-ridden. Howard had dropped out of school to take care of her, working nightshifts to assist her during the day. His days were spent at chemotherapy and doctor visits, and he struggled to pay the mortgage and other bills that kept them in the house.

As quickly as the disease had descended upon her, it was gone. His mother passed away in her sleep, only two years after being diagnosed. She was forty-six. Her passing had left him feeling angry and alone.

After her death, Howard joined the police force, throwing his aggression into intense physical training. He shunned his previous lifestyle of drinking and smoking and aimed for a life of clarity and focus. He pushed his body to its limits, fearing that if he let up, he would be overtaken by sickness.

Now, in the wake of the evening's events, he found himself clamoring for a taste of his past. *A cigarette would taste damn good right about now*, he thought.

But that would be a sign of weakness, and one the agents wouldn't allow.

In the distance, he could make out the White Mountains spiraling upwards into the heavens, oblivious to the concerns of the townspeople below. He sighed and placed his police hat on the seat next to him. He should probably be getting home.

Howard's pocket vibrated, and he jumped to attention. He reached for his cellphone, expecting to see the number of the sheriff, who would be calling to check up on him. His boss had instructed him to take a few weeks off—to heal and unwind from the trauma of the evening. Maybe the man missed him already.

It wasn't Sheriff Turner. It was Dan.

"Hello?"

The cellphone hissed and crackled in response. Howard smiled, wondering if his co-worker had placed the call by accident. He listened for a few seconds, just in case.

"Dan, you there?"

A *crash* erupted through the phone, and he held his ear away from the receiver to soften the noise. He heard the sound of heavy breathing, as if someone was winded.

Or perhaps engaged in a struggle.

Howard strained to hear through the static. His heart galloped as a voice cut through the line.

*"Please stop..."* the person begged. The voice was Dan's.



Howard was only a few minutes from Dan's house. He paused for a minute, then threw on his sirens, watching the yellows and reds pulse on the road in front of him. He grabbed his radio with his right arm and felt his wounded arm bend below the bandage. He winced and pushed the button.

"All available units, this is Officer Barrett. I'm heading to a possible 240 at 5 Shunpike Place. Need backup ASAP."

He released the lever and waited, rounding the next corner and nearly hitting the curb. Mickey's voice cut through the silence, back at him.

*"Howard? Aren't you supposed to be at home resting?"*

"I was. I'm heading to Dan's house now. I think he's in trouble."

*"I'm on my way,"* the kid responded. *"I'm across town. Give me a few."*

The cruiser bounded forward, Howard's thoughts with it. He thought of Frank's former comrades from The Down Under, raising their bottles in defiance at him. The world was full of scum. In his earlier years, he would have arrested them without question. But he knew now that it was useless. The next morning, they'd be out on the streets doing the same things.

People rarely changed.

He looked down at the cellphone in his lap, but it remained silent. He was almost to Dan's.

A few minutes later, he pulled onto Shunpike Place and approached the Lowery residence. The driveway was empty, but several lights blazed from inside. Normally, Dan and Julie parked their cars in the garage, so there was a good chance they were at home.

Howard exited the vehicle, drawing his gun with his bad arm. It was still numb from the anesthesia, and he wondered if he could even shoot.

He'd been careless in getting too close to Frank.

He wouldn't make that same mistake again.

He crept towards the house on the paved walkway. Through the front windows, the living room appeared empty. To the right of the living room, he could make out the dining room, which was dimly lit. It appeared that the family had been in the process eating dinner. He saw plates of food on the table, and glasses that were filled with liquid. Strangely, nobody was there to enjoy it.

Howard approached the windows for a better look. The chair at the head of the table had been knocked backwards, splintering on the dining room floor below. A glimmer of movement next to it drew his attention.

A figure was kneeling on the ground, one thin arm outstretched high into the air. A cascade of long brown hair covered the person's face, obscuring a positive identification, but it looked like a female.

In her hands was a butcher knife. She was getting ready to plunge it into whoever was below her.

His pulse began to pound. It was Julie.

Howard leapt onto the front steps and tried the front door. It was locked. He stepped back and then lunged forward with his foot, sending the door reeling inwards. The TV had been left on in the living room, filling the house with voices, but he could hear the sounds of struggle from the next room. He ran inside.



Howard stopped short when he got to the dining room. Dan was on the floor with Julie on top of him. From the looks of it, she was about to murder her husband.

Dan was holding his wife's wrist, the blade just inches from his nose. Tears ran down his cheeks, spilling onto the floor below. Julie's face was covered in shadow, her eyes sunken into two black recesses below her brows. She moved her head upward at Howard's arrival, but only slightly.

Howard planted his feet on the ground, stabilizing his pistol with both hands. Pain shot through his right arm from the pre-existing wound.

"Don't shoot her, Howard!" Dan screamed.

"Julie—drop the knife now!" he shouted.

The woman shook her hair back and forth, as if trying to block out their voices. With her free hand, she started to dig into her husband's stomach, tearing at his shirt. Dan screamed in agony, trying to break free.

"Dammit!"

Howard squeezed the trigger. The bullet connected with Julie's right shoulder, sending the knife clattering to the floor. She toppled backwards, her white dress rippling in the air. Dan rolled out from underneath her. He was screaming now—mouthing words that Howard could not hear. The gunshot still rang in Howard's ears, and he was temporarily deaf to the world around him.

Julie was back up again. She threw herself across the room, this time at Howard. Blood dripped from a hole in her shoulder, and her right arm flopped uselessly at her side. Dan reached for her, catching hold of her dress, and she pitched to the side, losing her balance. Her head collided with the corner of the dining room table, and she collapsed to the floor like a sack of laundry.

"Oh my God—no!" Dan screamed.

Howard watched his comrade fall to her side and push away her hair, cupping his hands around her neck—searching for a pulse, but seemingly finding none. The side of her head was sliced open, spilling her life essence onto the wood floor. Dan buried his face in his hands, and then started to stand.

"My daughter!"

"Where is she?" Howard asked.

"In her bedroom...the door is locked." Dan waved toward a key on the floor.

"I'll get her, Dan—just stay with Julie. I'll call for an ambulance."

Howard retrieved the key and headed down the hall toward the closed door on the right, his arms shaking. He'd done his best to prepare for this, but he felt a tinge of emotion. He shouldn't have come here. He should have stayed at home.

He fumbled with the lock for a few seconds, finally finding the keyhole. He pushed the door open with his foot, and then let his pistol lead the way.

A minute later he returned to Dan's side.

"The window's open," he said. "Quinn's gone."

## PART TWO—SECRET CHAOS

QUINN MADISON LOWERY HAD NEVER left home without permission. In fact, there were a lot of things she had never done. As she ran into the night, alone, she wondered if she would ever get the chance to do them.

She liked to think she was a good kid, and respectful to her mom and dad. Besides, her father was a police officer, and he could sniff out what she was up to before she even knew it herself. He was smart like that.

"Don't forget, I was a kid once myself," he often reminded her.

She wasn't perfect, though. Far from it. A year ago, she had been caught shoplifting at the local grocery store.

Quinn loved to read. She had been reading ever since she could remember—books, comics, magazines, or anything else she could get ahold of. For the most part, her parents were supportive of her habit. This time, however, her mom had been in a hurry, and wasn't in the mood to indulge Quinn's literary appetite.

"Not today, honey—I mean it."

All she'd wanted was one of the newest tabloid magazines. Inside, there was an article on one of her favorite actresses. Quinn didn't see the harm in it.

Unable to convince her mother, she'd tucked the magazine up into her shirt, securing the bottom in the waist of her blue jeans. She remembered how it felt—smooth against her stomach, but at the same time bulky and uncomfortable. In order to get out the door with it, she had needed to walk upright, arching her back like there was a metal rod in her spine. She remembered feeling a tinge of excitement as she walked out of the store, and then a moment of fear as she realized she would have to sit down in the car.

"What's wrong with you, Quinn? Why are you doubled over like that?" her mom had asked.

Quinn tried to bend down, but the thick folds of the magazine were digging into her gut, and it hurt too much to move.

"Do you have something in your shirt? Get over here!" her mother had demanded. "Lift it up!"

Quinn had revealed the magazine, her cheeks stiff and the blood draining from her face. Without a word, her mother had snatched it from her grasp, returning to the store to pay for it. While she was gone, Quinn started to panic. What would they do with her? Would she be sent to jail? Would her father arrest her? It was such a small town—she was sure everyone would find out her secret.

Quinn Madison Lowery was a thief, they would say. The thought made her nauseous.

Her mother had driven home in silence, the look on her face enough to fill a thousand conversations. But that had been the end of it. As far as Quinn knew, her mother had never spoken of the incident to her father.

Quinn promised herself she would never make the same mistake again. After all, she was ten years old now. She had learned a lot since she was nine.

Now, as she climbed from her bedroom window and into the night, she wondered how much trouble she would be in. Would she ever be allowed to leave the house again? Her legs scraped against the

windowsill, creating red marks in the pits of her knees, and she swiveled her arms and dropped to the ground below. Her heart pounded in her chest with fear.

She fell on her butt, using her hands as a cushion to break her fall. Inside the house, she could hear grunting and banging, as if a wrestling match were taking place in the dining room. She heard a voice, too, but wasn't sure if it was her father's. She couldn't take any chances. He may have a knife, too.

The air tasted dark and thick, and she struggled to catch her breath.

As she fled into the night, Quinn wondered who would punish her when she finally returned. In just a few hours, her world had been turned upside down.

**H**OWARD PAUSED ON THE LOWERY'S front porch, searching for movement in all directions. His cruiser sat where he had left it, and the garage door was still closed. To his right, he saw the open window where Quinn must have exited, curtains wafting outwards in the subtle breeze. He couldn't imagine she had gotten far.

"I'll find her, Dan," he called behind him. "Wait here a minute—she can't be far."

The officer moaned from inside, his grief spilling from the dining room and out into the night. The TV blared over him, playing the theme song of a classic detective show. Howard considered turning it off, but descended the steps instead.

He tried to put himself in the little girl's frame of mind. Where would she have run? He looked to his right, past the few trees that lined the property. The closest house was a few yards away. An old woman lived there. He thought her name was Sadie, but he couldn't recall. Either way, she must be approaching her eighties, and was probably fast asleep. Her house was black inside, offering no sign that she had received an unexpected guest.

The Reynolds family lived in the house on the left. Howard knew them well. They would often stop at the Lowery's for an evening barbeque. Their house, too, was dark. A single porch light illuminated the front steps, casting shadows like fingers into the yard. If they had received a knock at the door, he was certain they would have called the police by now.

Howard swept the perimeter of the house. In just a few minutes, he cleared the front and then made his way to the backyard. He almost tripped over a piece of wood on the ground, and realized it was the side of Julie's garden.

Four pieces of plywood flanked the sides, surrounding a variety of green, leafy plants in the center. He strained his eyes, but didn't recognize anything human amongst them. No figure was hiding in the interior.

The rest of the backyard was open, and he didn't see any other places Quinn could hide. He checked the far side of the house, but to no avail. If he had been the little girl, he probably would have run quite a ways before stopping. He imagined her trust was thin at this point. It wasn't every day that your mother came at you with a kitchen knife.

Howard thought back to what he had seen in the house. Julie was barely recognizable—a soulless, corpse-like version of her former self. Her eyes had seemed to penetrate through him, intent on destruction. Howard shuddered and bit his lip, trying to forget what he had seen.

*This had to happen*, he reminded himself.

He gripped his gun. A sudden glow in the distance drew his attention. Several hundred yards away, on what must have been an adjacent street, a light had just gone on in one of the houses.

Howard contemplated using his radio, and then withdrew his hand. It didn't matter, now, anyways. Nothing did.

He sucked in a breath and began to sprint towards the light.

Q

UINN STAYED UNTIL HER CHEEKS were red, her stomach was tight, and her legs began to tire. She fought the urge to look back, fearing that someone would grab her if she did. Surely, whenever the scuffle ended, somebody would come looking for her. Maybe even to kill her. Her heart leapt against her ribcage. She needed to get help—and fast.

She hadn't dared stop at the neighbors. The noise would have attracted immediate attention. Something told her she needed to get farther away in order to have a fighting chance.

Behind Shunpike Lane was another street—she forgot the name, but it was a nice road, and full of houses. Often, she would ride her bike there, watching the families and children. She used to dream about living there someday. The houses seemed nicer in that neighborhood. Now the houses hung in the distance: dark shapes that seemed strange and unfamiliar. She'd never been there at night.

Quinn wondered what time it was. It must be late—not a single house seemed active. The one closest to her had a small picnic table in the backyard. She could make out a dim glow from one of the back windows, probably from a nightlight. The Anderson family used to live here, but someone new had moved in last month. Her mother had been meaning to stop in to welcome them to the neighborhood. Back when things had still been normal.

There was a sliding glass door in back, but she realized knocking would make her visible to anyone behind her. Instead, she walked past the picnic table and began to cut through to the front yard. As she did so, the rear light flicked on. She stopped suddenly and turned back to face it.

A shadow stood behind the glass, surveying the lot outside. The lights inside the house were off, so Quinn could only make out a silhouette. The person remained still except for their head, which swiveled from side to side. Quinn hugged the side of the yard, hidden from the glow. She wanted to cry out, but her inner voice told her to stay still.

The shadow began to slide its hands down the glass, as if wiping at some unseen condensation. Its fingers were long and curved, and it rapped at the pane with its fingernails. She wondered if the hands' owner was a man or a woman. The person seemed to move unnaturally—unlike anyone she had ever seen. Without realizing it, she held her breath.

Quinn looked to her left, where another house sat in silence. If anybody else had been awakened by the light, they hadn't let on. Across the street, she made out another row of houses. They remained still. She looked back to the patio window.

The head and hands had stopped moving. She squinted, and could now make out a pair of ovals where the person's eyes should have been, reflecting in the moonlight. They seemed to be staring in her direction.

Quinn had been spotted.

She started to run, letting out bursts of breath as her legs kicked into gear. Behind her, she heard the sound of a sliding glass door being thrust open.

She crossed the side yard and into the front, the dry grass crunching under her feet. Although she wanted to look back, she pushed on. She entered the roadway, heard another pair of feet hit the grass

behind her. She pictured the long fingers swaying at the person's side, preparing to wrap around her neck like pieces of rope.

*Hurry up, Quinn*, she thought. Something wet hit her cheeks, and she realized she was crying. She wished her mother and father could be here, that they could help her. But they were in on the whole thing. Whatever the thing was.

She was on her own.

Pavement gave way to grass again, and she flew up the walkway to the nearest house. She banged on the door and rang the bell at the same time.

"Help!" she tried to call out, but her words were raspy and weak.

Footsteps slapped on the pavement behind her, drawing ever closer. She didn't have time to wait. *Keep moving*, she thought. Quinn stumbled through the darkness to the side of the house, heading deeper into the property. When she hit the backyard, a voice echoed from the front. She dared to glance behind her.

"Hello? Who's out there?" the person called.

The front lights came on, and she heard the homeowner open the screen door. Her pursuer stopped in the road.

"What do you want?" the homeowner asked.

The figure hovered in the street, arms at its sides. Quinn gripped the edge of the house, wondering if the shadow could still see her. She hoped not.

"I'm going to call the police!" the homeowner threatened. It was a man's voice, and his words rang with fear.

The figure crouched now, its arms hanging low to the ground. It hissed into the night, and she pictured a tongue as long as its fingers, sliding across a pair of razor-sharp teeth. She kept quiet, wondering if it could hear the sound of her heartbeat. It certainly seemed loud to her. She drew a breath and held it, wishing as hard as she could that she were invisible.

The figure began to move, arms swinging at its sides, heading for the front of the house. The homeowner continued to yell, but the figure ignored his warning.

Quinn moved along the side of the house, toward the front, until she was right at the edge. She could make out the homeowner now—it was Mr. Philips, one of her neighbors. His white hair gleamed in the porch light, and he was leaning out into the night, waving one arm at the intruder. Mr. Philips had helped her fill her bike tire once when she had gotten a flat. He didn't seem quite as friendly now.

"What the hell?" he yelled.

Before he could react, the figure was on him, pulling him out of the house. She heard ripping sounds as it tore at his chest, and then screaming as Mr. Philips fell to the ground. His hands flew up to protect his face, but the figure cast them aside, wrapping its fingers around the man's skull and its thumbs pushing into where his eye sockets would be.

Quinn held back a sob. She wanted to help. But what could she do? She was only ten years old. The thing was screeching now, and she saw blood splash onto the door. Quinn covered her eyes and cried—for her mother, for Mr. Philips, and for herself, knowing that she would never reach another birthday.

**H**OWARD REACHED THE HOUSE IN minutes, his boots pounding hard on the grass. A single light faced outward in the backyard, revealing a picnic table and an assortment of lawn chairs. The sliding glass door had been left open, as if someone had recently exited or entered.

He held his gun in front of him, watching for any signs of activity.

“Police!” he shouted through the opening.

He was met with silence. He advanced a few steps—and then heard a scream pierce the night air. It sounded like it was coming from past the house, across the next street. Howard swiveled and worked his way around front, toward the source of the noise.

His arm brushed his side, and he squirmed in pain. He sprinted past the house and into the road, ignoring the burning in his bicep. Directly ahead of him, illuminated by a porch light, a figure was bent over another man, unwrapping his insides and pulling them onto the walkway.

Howard aimed his gun in front of him, approaching the assailant and victim. The victim had been mutilated beyond recognition—his face condensed into a soupy puddle of blood and eyeballs. The walkway was stained with flesh and innards, and the figure sifted through the remains with delicate fingers.

The suspect looked up and raised its hands in the air, dangling pieces of detached skin. Its eyes blazed into Howard, devoid of life, eerily reminiscent of the look Julie had given him earlier.

Howard squeezed the trigger, firing a round into the figure’s head. It slammed backwards into the door, and he fired twice more into its chest. The emotion he’d felt before was fading.

He was already starting to feel the way he had felt with Frank.

Things were going exactly as planned.

Several lights appeared around him, and Howard tensed up. Heads peered through windows and doors cracked cautiously open. In the distance, behind the house, he heard the sound of a little girl screaming. The noise faded into the distance, her cries softening with each step.

In an instant, he knew it was Quinn. And he knew exactly where she was headed.



Quinn was on the move again. This time, she wasn’t going to stop. She had a destination in mind. She wasn’t sure why she hadn’t thought of it before, but she was sure glad she thought of it now.

She wasn’t ready to die. Not yet.

She kept running, dragging her feet like dumbbells. She screamed when gunshots rang out behind her, but continued on. A few sparse trees swayed in the wind, pointing her onwards, leading her from one street to the next. Only a few more neighborhoods to go, and she would be there.

Her throat started to burn. The doctor said she had mild asthma—not the kind that you needed to use an inhaler for, but enough that she should take it easy. In gym class, she was often excused from the more rigorous activities. She felt herself gasping for air now, but she did not slow down.



Ahead, she saw a familiar house on the horizon. She only needed to cross one more street to get there. Her feet hit pavement once again, and she prayed that she had outrun whoever might be following her.

Up ahead, Sheriff Turner's patrol car sat in the driveway. She wiped the tears from her eyes and felt a sense of relief wash over her. The house was dark, but he must be home. He had to be. She ran up the front steps and mashed her hands against the doorbell, hearing it ring inside the house. After a few seconds, she heard footsteps plodding through the house.

*Thank God*, she thought.

Quinn doubled over, her pulse beating through the side of her neck, and tried to breathe deeply. She needed to calm down so she could explain what had happened. She looked back, but saw no signs of her pursuer. The door creaked open behind her, and the familiar figure of Sheriff Turner filled the doorway.

"Sheriff," she tried to speak, but no sound came out.

She ran inside the house, under his outstretched arm, and motioned for him to shut the door. The lights were off, and she edged towards the couch, looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was following her inside. Though it was dark, rays of moonlight filtered through the windows and into the living room. Her foot struck something on the floor, and she paused suddenly and looked down.

Mrs. Turner's body lay in the center of the rug, curled up in a ball. An awful odor rose from the body. She looked dead.

"W-What happened?" she whispered, turning.

Sheriff Turner stood in the doorway like a statue, his arm still propped against the frame. It appeared he hadn't moved since letting her inside. At the sound of her voice, his body came to life, and he let the screen door slam shut. He lifted an enormous leg and began to move towards her.

"Sheriff—it's me, Quinn Lowery," she said, backing up against the couch.

The man started to wheeze, placing one calf in front of the other, shaking the living room with each footstep. Beads of sweat glistened from his forehead and rolled down his face. She backed up farther, hitting the couch and falling to a sitting position.

She began to cry.

The sheriff made a grab for her leg, and she swung it upwards and out of reach, letting out a stifled scream. She threw her arms over the couch and began to pull herself to the other side. Something sharp on the fabric ripped at her leg, and she cried out. She slid over the couch and onto the floor, just as Sheriff Turner landed on the cushions in front. His weight slid the couch backwards and into her shins, and she screamed in pain.

She limped towards the kitchen. A large lamp hugged the wall at the entrance, and she threw it down behind her to create a barricade. The Sheriff grunted as he regained his footing. Quinn forged ahead, avoiding the kitchen table and heading for the back door. She reached it and fumbled for the handle.

The doorknob turned, and then stopped. The door was locked. Her hands slid wildly around the knob, and she finally found the button on the center, twisting it sideways and releasing the catch.

The door wouldn't budge. It must be dead-bolted.

Sheriff Turner was in the kitchen now, making his way toward her, and she began to panic. Her eyes were starting to adjust, and she searched for anything she could use as a weapon. The counters contained a mess of appliances—a toaster, a blender, and some dirty dishes—but nothing of use. It was too late. He was upon her now, and he flung his arm forward, reaching for her head.

Quinn tried to duck, but not in time. She felt a piece of hair rip from her scalp, and her eyes stung with pain. She scooted on the floor, the vinyl cold on her fingertips and knees, and slid her way across the kitchen and back into the living room.

There was a door on her right, and she yanked it open and slammed it shut behind her, wedging herself between a mop and bucket. She held the inside handle, waiting for it to turn in her fingers, and choked back a sob.

On the other side of the door, she could hear the Sheriff knocking over the kitchen table and chairs, destroying his own belongings to get to her. She imagined what would happen when he found her hiding in the closet, weaponless and alone. Her eyes welled up, and she began to shake.

**H**OWARD RACED TOWARD SULLIVAN AVENUE. If he'd calculated correctly, the road was about four blocks away—cutting through backyards, of course. He could have returned to his cruiser, but he would have lost precious time.

*I should probably return home*, he thought.

But something pressed him onward. Whether it was the adrenaline or the taste of the night air, Howard felt more alive than he had in years.

And that feeling was keeping him going.

He perked up his ears, listening for signs of the girl. He hadn't heard any screaming now for a few minutes. Either the girl had wised up, or she had already reached her destination. The thought struck him that she may have fallen prey to another attacker.

As he ran, Howard wondered if he had guessed correctly as to her whereabouts. If she had taken another turn somewhere in the dark, it would be almost impossible to find her. He would need to use the spotlights on his cruiser.

As he passed through the next street, he saw lights flicking on from the houses around him. Presumably the homeowners had heard the commotion. In several doorways, he noticed shadows staring at him, and he began to feel an even deeper sense of unease.

The grass crunched underfoot, fried from the desert heat and lack of water. He imagined that if he stopped to inspect it, he would see Quinn's footprints leading the way. The radio crackled in his ear, breaking his concentration.

*"Howard, you there?"* Mickey said.

Howard reached up to his shoulder and silenced the radio.

As he finally reached the fourth street, he noticed all the lights were off. There was no sign of activity among the residents. Perhaps Quinn had veered off in another direction, or she had stopped screaming just shy of Sullivan Avenue, leaving its residents blissfully asleep. He glanced farther up the road, and squinted into the night. His initial observation had been incorrect. One set of porch lights was on, near the end of the road. Now that he had noticed them, they seemed to illuminate the house in the night like a beacon.

Sheriff Turner's patrol car sat in the driveway.

Either his boss was getting ready to leave the house—already made aware of the night's events—or else a little girl had knocked on his door just short of midnight. Howard crossed the road, running now.

He drew close to the car, holding his gun in front of him. The screen was shut, but the storm door had been left open. As he started up the walkway, he heard a tremendous crash from inside.

"Sheriff?" he called in.

The banging continued. A girl's shriek rang out from within. Howard threw open the door, leading with his pistol, and entered the living room. A massive shadow hugged the back of the room. It was ramming against a door on the other side.

"Police! Hold it right there!" Howard yelled.

He reached to his left, feeling for the light switch. Thankfully, his memory served him well, and the room lit up. He had been to the Sheriff's house plenty of times, but never on police business. His jaw dropped as he surveyed the scene.

The first thing he saw was the body of Mrs. Laney Turner. The woman was facedown in the middle of the room, her head caved in. The busted frames of her glasses lay beside her, stuck to the wood floor in a collage of blood. Clumps of her hair covered the carpet.

Sheriff Turner stood behind the couch, his hands raised above his head. Black streaks covered his eyes, as if they had been injected with vials of India ink. He had ripped open the hall closet, tearing the frail wooden door from its hinges, and it now lay sideways by his feet. His massive figure concealed the majority of the doorframe, but Howard could see through his legs.

Quinn Lowery sat amongst the cleaning products, arms tucked over her head. She whimpered as she saw him, as if he, too, had come to attack her.

The sheriff grunted, turning his attention to the new visitor. He began to move towards the front door.

Howard gritted his teeth and fired the pistol. He continued to squeeze the trigger, firing one round after the next, until he had emptied the entire clip into his boss. The bullets riddled the fat man's body, pulling corks of flesh from his stomach and spilling red fluid beneath. The sheriff's eyes rolled in his head, and he collapsed with a *thud* onto the floor.

The girl began to bawl. She put her head between her legs, hair billowing over her knees. Howard looked at her and then at the body on the floor. The sheriff lay in a pool of blood, his dead wife just ten feet away. Howard felt nothing.

Nothing at all.

He lowered his gun. For the first time that night, a sense of calm swept over him.

"Come with me," he said to the girl. Although he didn't realize it, his lips had curved upwards into a smile.



Howard and Quinn walked in silence. The girl trailed behind, sniffing quietly to herself, but didn't utter a word.

After taking care of the sheriff, Howard had warned Quinn to keep her composure and remain quiet. He instructed her to stick to his side as they made their way back to the Lowery residence. He'd been harsh, but it was what she needed to hear. The gunshots had attracted enough attention.

Even still, the streets seemed eerily silent. Many of the houses still had their lights blazing, but Howard no longer saw any shadows in the doorways. It was as if the residents had returned to bed, unaware of the danger. *Or else they were roaming the streets, looking for victims*, he thought.

Howard stopped suddenly. A sound had emitted from a pair of trees in front of them. The girl stopped behind him.

He aimed his gun. An object had begun to move behind one of the tree trunks. He saw a flash of white from near the ground, and then something jutting out into the open. A tail. Howard lowered his weapon. A cat came slinking towards them, purring. He imagined they had caught the animal mid-chase—probably on the hunt for a mouse or some other rodent. It rubbed against the girl's legs, and he waved his arms at it, sending it scurrying back behind the trees.

Howard glanced around them in all directions, but no other figures emerged. He took the opportunity to withdraw a cellphone from his pocket. A text message was waiting for him.

*Status?* It read.

He returned his gun to its holster, and signaled for the girl to wait. Her eyes fell downwards, and she stared at her shoes in compliance. Using his thumbs, he drafted a reply.

*On schedule.*

He hit the 'send' button, and returned the phone to his pocket. Later, he would break it into pieces and discard the remnants in various locations. Just to be sure. Though he doubted anyone would ever make the connection. The cellphone had been sent to him by mail, probably purchased from a remote location. He knew he could trust the phone's sender.

Right now, he needed to focus to ensure his survival. That was what was expected of him. To monitor the townspeople, to ensure all went as planned. Only when the destruction of St. Matthews was complete would he be able to relax. He withdrew his pistol once again and began to move. The girl fell in line behind him.

Out of respect for Dan, he had decided to return the little girl—but that was it. Afterwards, the pair would be on their own, along with the rest of this God-forsaken town.

## PART THREE—BROKEN FOUNDATION

**D**AN CLUNG TO HIS DEAD wife for what seemed like an eternity. He parted her hair, kissed her forehead, and tried to ignore the fact that she looked nothing like the woman he loved. The gash on her head had stopped bleeding, but a puddle of blood on the floor served as evidence that she had once been alive.

His mind was spinning, still trying to comprehend what had happened. For a second, he felt like he was out of his own body, looking down at himself.

He needed to find his daughter. Where the hell was Howard? And where the hell were the medics? Howard had called them, hadn't he?

His eyes darted around the room, passing over the wreckage that had once been his dining room. Julie's chair lay on its back. Several of the rungs had cracked, and the back had started to separate from the frame. Next to it was the knife, which gave off only a dull shine—far less threatening without a hand to wield it.

He had dropped his pistol on the floor next to him, freeing up both hands to cradle his wife's body. The gun seemed to beckon to him now, a subtle reminder of his duties as a police officer and father. He felt a breeze pass through the house, kicking up a lock of Julie's hair and draping it across his face. Howard must have left the door open.

Dan began to think about getting up, about releasing his death-grip on a woman who had already embraced death. They'd been married for eleven years. He had known her since high school. He remembered how beautiful she had looked at their wedding—how brave she had been during the birth of their child. He grit his teeth and fought back the tears. He needed to let go. He needed to move. His daughter needed him.

He let his hands slip from her body, wiped his arm across his face to dry his eyes, and gently eased his wife back to the floor. Quinn was still out there, and if he lost her too, he would have lost everything.

Before he could stand, a pair of footsteps clapped against the pavement outside. *The rest of the force*, he thought. He was sure that Mickey and Sheriff Turner would be on their way—in fact he was surprised they hadn't made it already. As the noises continued, he realized something sounded off. His fellow officers would have announced their presence. The footsteps he heard seemed muffled, as if the owners were trying to conceal their arrival.

Dan's police instincts started to kick in, and he scurried to the far end of the dining room, positioning himself between the table and the living room doorway.

The screen door at the front of the house banged against the frame. He considered calling out, but decided against it. He aimed the pistol in front of him, propping his arms on one of the chairs.

The TV volume seemed to increase, and he strained to hear over it. Something scraped against the wall in the living room, and Dan's body went rigid.

Someone was in the next room.

A mottled hand entered the doorway, pawing at the air in front of it, testing the waters. After the appendage came a torso, and then a full body; black eyes scanning back and forth as it wormed

sideways into the dining room. Dan recoiled at the figure, whose face appeared to be disintegrating in a mound of flesh. It idled towards him, feeling its way forward, heading right for the table.

Dan fired a round, shattering its knee and sending it reeling to the floor. Another was behind it, this one faster than the last, already veering around Julie's body and gaining ground. He fired again, splintering the side off of the chair opposite him, missing his target. The chair toppled backwards, landing on Julie's body.

Dan was on his feet now, scooting around the table. The first attacker fumbled on its broken knee, contending with the chair, and its companion pushed past it without skipping a beat. The creatures—*things*—spewed bile from their mouths, salivating onto the floor below as they tried to reach him.

He reached the living room doorway. Behind him, he heard the remaining furniture topple over. He crossed the room, panting, and stopped at the front screen door. Outside, three more were headed up the walkway. They began to groan when they saw him.

"Oh, fuck," he whispered.

Dan slammed the front door shut, dead-bolting it. He whipped around, gun in front of him, and felt something grab his arm. One of the first houseguests had caught up to him. Its fingers were cold on his skin, wrapping around his wrist like icicles.

He kicked forward, connecting with its stomach, and sent it toppling backwards into the couch. He raised his pistol and fired into it, gritting his teeth. Three bullets passed through its chest, blood and bile rippling out from the wounds. The creature sunk down onto the couch cushions, and then stood up again, unfazed.

He heard the sound of nails on the front screen, and then something pounding on the front door. If he didn't get out this house, Dan was certain it would become his tomb.

He skirted around the couch, avoiding the outstretched hands of the creature in the living room, and entered the dining room again. The first creature was still on the floor, crawling on its knees, coming towards him. He shot off a round into its head and watched it collapse to the floor.

He swiveled again, facing the remaining creature from the living room—this time aiming for its forehead. Maybe that was the key. *Just like the god-damn movies*, he thought, realizing at once how insane that sounded. His heart sunk when he pulled the trigger.

He was out of bullets.



“I DON'T WANT TO GO BACK home,” Quinn whispered.

Howard looked at her, but his eyes seemed distant. He was holding his gun in one hand and a cellphone in the other. He kept checking the phone, as if expecting someone to call. His arms were crooked upwards, and his muscles bulged underneath his shirt.

Quinn had always looked up to him. Whenever he visited, he was especially nice. On her last birthday, he had even brought her a stack of books to read—introducing her to some of the classics that he had enjoyed as a child. Now, everything seemed different. *Howard* seemed different.

“We have to go back,” he said. “Your father is there.”

But her mother was too. A pang of fear went through her stomach as she pictured her mother shoving her into the bedroom, knife in hand.

“Are my mom and dad ok?”

Howard was looking at the phone again, typing on the keypad.

“Sure, Quinn. They’re both fine. I’m going to take you home to them.”

He kept his eyes on the cellphone, but she saw him watching her out of the corner of his eye. He wasn’t telling the truth. She could sense it. But why would he lie? What would he say when they got to her house and the truth was right there in front of them?

She pictured Sheriff Turner’s body in the living room, bloated and bleeding. She didn’t know much about gunshot wounds, but Howard hadn’t even checked for a pulse—he’d just left the man on the floor. It was as if he wasn’t even concerned about him. Or maybe he knew something she didn’t. She watched him type away on the cellphone. Who was he talking to? And why were they standing here?

Howard finished his message. A few seconds later, the phone vibrated.

Quinn moved closer to the officer. In the dark, she could almost make out the incoming text message. She forced herself to cry again, inching towards him.

“It’s ok,” he said, but he made no physical effort to console her.

She was standing next to him now; her eyes were level with the phone. The screen glowed yellow. She shuddered when she read the words.

*Every last one must go.*

Quinn started to run.

**D**AN WAVED THE EMPTY PISTOL in front of him, but the creature kept coming. It sidestepped Julie's body and then walked over the body of its dead companion. Its eyes rolled back into its head, and it began to groan.

He stepped backwards into the kitchen, still holding the gun, wishing he had the time or the means to reload. His palms were sweaty, and he struggled to keep his balance. He bumped into the roll of paper towels and it skittered backwards, unraveling to the end of the tube.

The creature advanced.

Dan spotted his keys—they were on the counter to his left. A few steps further and he could make a grab for them.

"Stay back!" he shouted.

The thing's mouth opened, revealing a row of dirt-covered teeth. If it understood him, the words had little effect. Dan threw his arm sideways, succeeding only in pushing the keys farther down the counter. He made another grab. This time, he was able to close his fist around them.

He eyed the knife holder. In his haste, he'd already passed by it. He could lunge toward it, but that would put him in harm's way. The creature stood beside it, mouth hanging open. He needed to get out of the house.

He reached behind him, finding the door handle, and stepped back into the garage. He slammed the door closed, and then used his keys to lock it. The creature smashed against the other side, but the door held. For now.

Dan's cruiser was where he had left it, and the garage door remained closed. He ran to the car door, fumbling with the keychain. He saw his house key, his locker key, and a slew of others. Where the hell was the car key? *Focus*, his mind screamed.

The creature pounded on the kitchen door, shaking it in the frame. Dan located the key and slipped it into the lock. The car was open now. He flung open the door and hopped inside, and then promptly shut it behind him.

*Bam!* The kitchen door caved in, whipping against the wall and off the hinges. The creature was loose in the garage now, heading towards the car.

Dan cried out in surprise, turning the key in the ignition.

The car fired up and he revved the engine. He reached up and hit the garage door opener, watching it open behind him in the rearview mirror. The creature was at the driver's side window now, just inches away. Its breath fogged up the glass, and it began to pound on the window.

"C'mon, hurry up!" Dan screamed at the garage door.

He threw the car in reverse and hit the gas. The car began to inch backwards. Dan looked behind him and then rammed on the brakes.

Howard's police cruiser was parked in the driveway, directly behind the garage door. Julie's Subaru Outback sat to his right. There was no way to get his cruiser out of the garage.

The creature hissed at him through the window, its nails scratching on the glass. Dan glanced in his rearview again. The three other things from the front yard had stepped into the garage, and were now

heading for the cruiser. He looked down at the ignition. The key to the Outback dangled from the chain.

He needed to get to the other car. And fast.

Dan ripped the keys from the ignition and climbed into the passenger seat, knocking over a coffee cup on his way. His gun was on the seat, but it was useless without bullets. He tucked it into his holster anyway, then reached for the door handle. He paused to look around him.

The creature to his left had begun moving around the front of the cruiser. Three others approached the passenger side. The Outback was just a few feet away. If he didn't get out of the cruiser soon, he would be trapped. Dan opened the door and leapt out.

He grabbed hold of the car key and threw it into the Outback, but it was too late. One of the creatures ripped at his shirt collar, tearing him away from the vehicle.

"No!" he shouted.

Dan threw his elbow back and felt it connect with a face. The attacker fell backwards, knocking into its companions, but the three barricaded any escape from the garage.

He was surrounded.

Dan dropped to the floor and began to pull himself underneath the Outback. As he did, he heard something clatter onto the floor behind him. *Damn*, he thought. *My keys*. From underneath the car, he saw a parade of tattered shoes stepping around them. His pulse beat through his body, sending a rush of blood to his temples.

Dan wiggled his feet, suddenly feeling claustrophobic. He reached his arm out slowly, but the keys were too far away. He inched towards them, balling his feet and pushing off the garage floor. He could almost reach them. He strained his fingers, watching them leave the protection of the vehicle and enter the open garage. He had almost made it when a cold, fleshy hand grabbed his wrist.

One of the creatures was on the ground, looking back at him with dark eyes. It hissed and pulled on his arm.

"Get the hell off of me!"

He wrenched his hand back, wincing as the creature's nails scratched his wrist. The other things dropped to their knees and began reaching underneath the car, inspired by their companion. Dan pulled himself towards the other side, avoiding four sets of hands that were now clambering to get to him.

He glanced towards the passenger side of the vehicle. The garage wall was empty, providing a few feet in which he could maneuver. There were no sets of feet on that side. For now, the coast was clear. He edged himself sideways, and stood up quickly on the opposite side.

One of the creatures had started to roam towards the trunk, blocking a quick exit out the front of the garage. He looked around, searching for another option. On the back wall, he spotted the gardening tools hanging neatly from their pegs. Amongst them was a pitchfork.

Dan made a dash for it. The creatures had given up on the car and were now headed his way. He grabbed the pitchfork from the wall and swung it in front of him.

"C'mon you bastards!"

One of the creatures made a grab for him, and he propelled the tines deep into its stomach, sending it reeling backwards. He pulled back on the handle, watching a rainfall of blood soak its shirt. It staggered, momentarily off balance. He turned the pitchfork sideways and swung it like a baseball bat, propelling the creature into the side of the Outback.

He squeezed past it and towards the back of the garage. The others were by the trunk now, and he gored the first in the neck. It toppled backward, but Dan persisted, plunging the weapon into the mass of gray flesh behind it, striking each in turn. The creatures tumbled backwards, hitting the floor, and he stood over each of their bodies, ramming the garden tool into one after the other until all movement had stopped.

When he finished, Dan realized he was screaming. He looked down at the creatures, whose bodies were now covered in gaping holes, fluid spilling from their insides. In all his years on the force, he had

never killed anyone. In fact, he often prayed that he would retire before getting the chance. He had seen plenty of dead bodies, but none that had met their demise at his own hands.

Dan turned his head and vomited on the garage floor, letting the pitchfork clatter to the ground. When he was finished retching, he dragged the bodies from behind the car, clearing a path to the outside.

He retrieved the keys and started the Outback. He threw it into reverse, and sped down the driveway and out into the road.

Somewhere, his daughter was in danger. He just prayed to God he wasn't too late to save her.

**T**HE LITTLE GIRL TOOK OFF running, and Howard chased after her. His attention had been on the cellphone, so she'd taken him by surprise. It didn't matter. She wouldn't get far. The phone vibrated again in his hand, but this time he slid it into his pocket.

They'd been standing next to the side of a house when she took off. A few trees lined the perimeter, and she had slipped through them to the neighboring property. He clutched his gun, unsure of what he might run into. The plan had been set in motion, and soon the streets would start to fill with the infected. *The contamination had begun.*

Ahead of him, he saw a small shadow slip around to the front of the house next door. Although he only caught a quick glance, he was pretty sure it was Quinn. He thought for a second about abandoning the chase, about letting fate take its course. Sooner or later, she would run into one of them, and that would be the end of it. Saving her now would only delay the inevitable.

Five years ago, when he had moved to St Matthews, Howard had tried to keep to himself. There was no use in befriending any of his co-workers or socializing with the townspeople—not with what he knew was coming. He tried to focus instead on his training, on honing his physical and mental abilities. After a few years, he had let his guard down.

He had started engaging in the occasional barbeque, a monthly game of pool. The town's fate was sealed, he thought, so he may as well make the most of his time there. The Agent leaders had said to blend in to the community—to act as natural as possible.

Now, Howard felt a tinge of pity for Dan and his family. He had grown closer to them than he had intended. But nobody would escape the contamination. He needed to remind himself of that fact. Helping them now would do nothing.

He would be the only survivor in St. Matthews.

Still, he did intend to find the girl and bring her back to her father—it was the honorable thing to do. And Howard liked to think he was an honorable man. He'd give them a fighting chance.

He rounded the corner of the house and stopped short. Two shadows hugged the siding. The smaller figure lay in the grass, shielding her face and whimpering. It was Quinn, and she was cornered.

The larger shadow turned to face Howard. Its face was a blackened mess, and it snarled at him. He drew back his arm, and then punched the thing in the head, sending it to the ground. It squirmed, trying to regain its footing, and he aimed his gun between its eyes.

Howard pulled the trigger, and Quinn screamed. The creature went still.

"Let's go, Quinn! If you run again, I'll leave you out here. You understand?"

The girl nodded.

"Get up," he said, softening his tone. "I know this is difficult, but this whole thing is something that needed to happen. The world needs this."

She averted her eyes and followed behind him. He didn't expect her to understand. How could she? She was just a child. He would be glad when all of this was over and done with.

He reached for his phone and read the message that had come in earlier.

*Head back to the station and await further instruction.*



Howard signaled for the girl to stop as they approached the front of the Lowery residence. The garage door was open now, and the lights from inside spilled out over the driveway and illuminated the yard. The interior was covered in blood, and he saw what looked like the bodies of several infected. Howard's patrol car was still in the driveway, directly behind Dan's. Julie's car was gone.

He looked at the little girl, watching her eyes fill with hope.

"Stay quiet," he said.

Howard crept across the yard and looked through the front windows. The dining room was a mess of broken furniture. The table had been turned on its side, and the chairs were toppled over. Julie's body lay underneath the wreckage. One of the dead things was next to her. He glanced behind him, but Quinn was standing in the middle of the lawn where he had left her. He held up his hand so she would stay put.

The living room was equally destroyed—the TV had been knocked over, and the couch was halfway across the room. However, the place appeared empty. Dan had put up a fight. He wasn't surprised, given the officer's track record on the force. Maybe that was why he hadn't turned into one of them yet. Perhaps his body was keeping the infection at bay.

He looked back at Quinn again. She, too, seemed to be holding her own. But it was only a matter of time. He motioned toward his cruiser in the driveway.

"Let's go."

A pair of high beams suddenly lit up the driveway and Howard shielded his eyes. A car was coming toward them down the road. He wondered if it was Dan.

As the vehicle approached, he could make out two shadows in the front seat, and the outline of police sirens on the roof. There was only one other patrol car unaccounted for. Mickey's. He cursed under his breath, wishing things didn't have to be so complicated.

The cruiser barreled up the driveway and onto the lawn, and then stopped. The windows were down, and he could hear the young officer shouting from inside the vehicle.

"What the fuck? Get off of me, man!"

The passenger was one of the infected, and it clung to Mickey's arm, tearing into the side of his neck with its teeth. The officer cried out in pain, struggling to break free, but unable to undo his seatbelt.

"Help!" he screamed.

The words echoed into the night, bouncing into the garage and past the mound of dead bodies inside. Howard stood motionless, watching his fellow officer flail uselessly at the creature.

"Do something!" Quinn cried out from behind him.

Howard walked to the driver's side of the vehicle and raised the gun. The creature paused mid-bite, its teeth covered in fleshy residue. He squeezed the trigger, firing a round into its head. The thing collapsed into Mickey's neck, falling into the wound it had created.

"Fuck, man," Mickey whispered, blood gurgling through the side of his opened neck. His eyes were wide, and his arms convulsed at his sides. He reached one of his arms toward Howard. "Help me, please..."

Howard turned away and began to walk towards his cruiser.

"In the car," he barked at the girl.

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the station."

"Is my dad there?" Her lips trembled.

Howard looked at her, but didn't answer. His eyes were devoid of emotion.

**D**AN SCOUTED THE STREETS OF St. Matthews, searching for any sign of his missing daughter. From Shunpike Lane, he looped around to Treetop Place, and then to Archibald Avenue. He gripped the steering wheel of the car, hands shaking. He tried to dispel the image of his dead wife on the dining room floor.

Julie was gone.

He felt the salty sting of tears hit his lips, and he wiped his face with his sleeve. But Quinn was still alive. She had to be. He pictured his daughter, out on the streets, perhaps fighting for her life just as he had been moments ago. Where could she have gone?

He wracked his brain, trying to determine Quinn's thought process. She was a smart kid—probably smarter than most her age. He held out hope that she had been able to find assistance.

But what if the entire town was infected? What help would there be then? And why hadn't he been stricken with the disease—whatever it was? He looked down at his hands, and then glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. Maybe he was moments away from turning into one of the things himself.

Dan shivered and forced the thought from his mind. Whatever the reason, he was still conscious, still *himself*. At least, he thought he was. And as far as he knew, so were Quinn and Howard.

Dan patted his pocket. His cellphone was still there. *Thank God*. He pulled it out and dialed his senior officer's number. The call went straight to voicemail.

"C'mon, man!"

He dialed again, but with no luck. He scanned his phone for any messages or voicemails, but none had been received. He tucked the device back in his pocket and then looked back at the road. About a hundred feet ahead, just beyond his headlights, he saw a glimmer of movement.

"What the hell?"

A few shadows darted from left to right, and he wiped his eyes to ensure his vision wasn't distorted. A yellow sign passed on his right.

*Pedestrian Crossing.*

*25 MPH.*

Dan flicked on his high beams, and then held his breath. A swarm of creatures were in the road, arms hanging at their sides, marching toward a figure lying on the curb. A few were on their knees, ripping into it. *Pulling out the person's insides*, he thought. He hit the brakes, coming to a stop just fifty feet away. Their heads seemed to turn in unison.

There had to be about twenty of the things.

Dan threw the car into reverse. The creatures were running now, hissing and spitting in an attempt to get to the Outback. He revved the engine, and the car rolled backwards, but not fast enough. One of the creatures tore at the driver's side mirror, ripping it clean off the vehicle. Another flailed its arms at the hood. Others flanked the passenger's side, starting to bang on the windows.

Dan shouted at them, swerving the wheel in an attempt to throw them off. He felt the tires run over a pair of feet, and saw one of the things fall. He stomped the brake, bringing the car to a halt, and then threw it into drive. The things pounded harder on the windows. He hit the gas and sped forward.

He aimed the car straight ahead, where a few stragglers had begun to congregate. They raised their arms and moved towards the vehicle.

"That's right, keep coming!"

Dan plowed into three of the things, hurling them over the hood of the car and back onto the pavement. The others had fallen behind, unable to catch the speeding vehicle.

Suddenly he was free, driving into the night, the chaos behind him. Even with the windows up, he could still smell the pungent odor of blood and decay finding its way through the vents. He rolled down the window, but only to a crack. *What has this world come to?*

His cellphone rang, and he felt his heart skip a beat. He answered the call.

"Hello?"

A voice whispered from the other end.

*"He's got Quinn."*

Dan looked down at the phone. It was Mickey.

"Who has her? Mickey, are you ok?"

*"H-Howard has her. They're headed to the station."*

Mickey's voice sounded labored, as if he was speaking underwater. Dan felt a wave of nausea creep over him.

"Where are you?" Dan asked.

His friend paused.

*"Don't t-trust him, Dan."*

The call disconnected.



**T**HE LITTLE GIRL SQUIRMED IN the backseat of the cruiser. Howard had put her there to ensure she wouldn't try running again. He would bring her to the station, and then he would contact her father. Fate should take its course from there. He hoped they didn't meet up again—for their sake.

So far, the streets were empty. Either the infection was still spreading, or the residents were elsewhere, searching for victims. Howard felt a tickle in his throat, and coughed into his hand. He looked down, expecting for a brief moment to see blood on his hand. *Just like his mother had seen years ago, when she had been diagnosed with cancer.* But he knew better. He'd been careful.

Instead of abusing his body the way so many others did, he'd dedicated his life to physical perfection. The Agent leaders had shown him a better way. Humanity was overdue for a cleansing, and only the strongest would survive.

He reached between the seats and retrieved a bottle of water that he had stored there. He twisted off the cap and drank from it. At home, he had several storerooms full of food and drink—enough to last him a year or so, he figured. Plenty of time to outlast the infection.

The Agent leaders had warned him before the contamination was to begin. He'd been prepared. A few weeks prior, he'd received the text message. It was one he'd been waiting on for five years.

*It has begun.*

Since then, he'd been watching, waiting for the first signs.

Each year, around this time, he received a package in the mail containing a new cellphone. He would carefully discard the old one and destroy the envelope it had come in. Updates had been few and far between, but he'd been kept informed.

Now, he was using the phone to report the progress in St. Matthews. Due to the town's small size and remote location, Howard guessed it was one of the first to be infected. *A trial run for what was to come.*

The information Howard had was limited. He'd been told that the virus would start with the food and water supply, and that he should avoid anything produced after a certain date. But he also knew that the Agents had infiltrated numerous sectors of society—there were plenty of other ways to spread the disease. According to the leaders, he would be briefed as necessary. His survival had been guaranteed. When he was certain everything was progressing as planned, he would retreat back to his house—to wait until the infection had run its course.

The world needed a change. Humanity had abused the earth, destroying their bodies and the environment, succumbing to selfishness and materialism. He had seen everything clearly when his mother died. He had changed his own ways. He had given up his vices.

It was too bad others couldn't see the same thing—that they couldn't realize the flaws in their existence. Now they would suffer the ultimate consequence.

He felt honored to be a part of the first phase. Someday, he might be remembered for being one of the pioneers of the new world.

"Howard?" the girl called out from the backseat.

He sat upright, replacing the water bottle.

"What do you want?"

"Can I get out now? You can drop me off here. I'll be fine."

"I can't do that," he said. "I have to take you back to your father, at the station."

The girl hugged her arms across her chest.

"Does he even know I'm here?"

"Yes," Howard lied.

He could tell she didn't believe him. But it didn't matter. Not anymore.

They were just a few blocks from the station. Howard noticed a few shadows at the side of the road. The cruiser's headlights revealed two creatures picking away at a carcass. They looked up at the passing vehicle and took a few steps toward it as he drove by.

"Not tonight," he muttered.

A few seconds later, Howard pulled into the station. The parking lot was empty. He parked the cruiser and opened the back door, motioning for the girl to get out. She slid out of the backseat and onto the pavement, her eyes darting around the lot. He grabbed her arm and led her to the front door of the station.

The building appeared intact. He unlocked the door, pulled the girl inside, and then locked it behind them.

"This way," he said.

He led her down the corridor toward the jail cell. For a second, he envisioned Frank's body inside, still covered in the blue blanket. The cell had since been cleaned, but he could make out a small red stain underneath the bench, and he grimaced. He unlocked the door and pulled it open, its hinges groaning in protest.

"Inside."

The girl looked at him and began to cry.

"I don't want to go in there, Howard."

She looked up at him, her face streaked with tears. He relaxed his grip on her arm, and then felt her slip through his fingers. She started to run for the door.

Howard lunged after her, catching hold of her shirt and pulling her backwards. She flailed in his arms, screaming. He threw her into the cell and locked the door, and then headed for the corridor.

Then he took out his cellphone.

**D**

AN TURNED OFF HIS LIGHTS as he pulled into the police station. He was still reeling from what he had heard. Mickey's voice played over and over in his head.

*"Don't trust him, Dan."*

He had tried calling the officer back several times, but the call had gone to voicemail. What had Mickey meant? In the midst of what was going on, the cryptic warning sent a shiver of fear through Dan's body. Howard had been his closest friend on the force for five years. What ill intent could he possibly have?

At the same time, he also felt a sense of relief. From the sounds of it, his daughter was alive. He just needed to get to her as soon as possible.

A single cruiser sat in the police station lot. Dan eyed the license plate, confirming that it was Howard's. He parked his car and shut off the engine. The lights were on in the station, but the painted glass windows blocked his view of the inside. As he stepped outside the vehicle, he remembered there were cameras in the parking lot. He hoped the senior officer wasn't watching them.

He felt for his gun, which was still in its holster. Without bullets, it would be next to useless in the event of an attack.

Dan withdrew the weapon anyway and crept across the open parking lot. He stopped at Howard's cruiser, peering inside. To his surprise, the doors were unlocked, as if Howard had been in a hurry. He opened the door and looked inside. Between the seats was a police baton. *Better than nothing*, he thought. He gently closed the door.

He crossed the rest of the lot to the front door and tugged at the handle. It was locked. He inserted his key and opened the station. Once inside, he scanned the parking lot for the creatures, and then locked the door behind him.

The front corridor was empty. To his left was the door to the locker room. To his right, he saw the door to the main office. There were two other doors— one to the supply room and one to the janitor's closet. The entrance to the jail cell was at the opposite end. He heard voices now. One of them grew louder as he approached.

"Howard, please let me out!"

It was Quinn. Had Howard locked her in the jail cell?

Dan began to shake. He felt the urge to dart down the hall, throw open the door at the end, and help her. But he needed to be cautious. Their lives depended on it.

His mind raced. How could Howard have turned on him? The man had stood by his side for years, had always proved himself to be a trustworthy ally. Hell, he'd even eaten meals with Dan's family, had given his daughter gifts for her birthday. Was he infected like the rest of them? Why else would he do this?

The thought made him sick.

Dan heard movement now, from behind the door up ahead. It sounded like someone was getting ready to exit. He hugged the left side of the corridor, and then ducked into the locker room, gripping the baton to his chest.

He heard the door creak open in the corridor, and then footsteps echoing off the walls.

"Howard, please! Don't leave me in here!" Quinn yelled.

The door slammed shut. Dan held his breath, listening to the man approach. The senior officer couldn't be more than ten feet away, on the other side of the locker room wall. Dan pressed his cheek against a row of lockers, the metal cold against his cheek.

The footsteps ceased. The echoes tapered off, and the station fell silent.

Had he been spotted on the cameras? Was Howard aware that he was in the station—maybe even aware of his location in the locker room?

Inside the lockers, just inches away, were spare weapons, as well as ammunition. He could make a move for them, but the senior officer would be on him before he could use the keys. Silence permeated the station, and he felt his heart thudding in his chest.

Something vibrated in his pocket, and then Dan's cellphone began to ring.

*Shit*, he thought.

The tone echoed through the locker room and beyond, betraying any cover he may have had. He slipped the phone out of his pocket, hitting the silent button and looking at the faceplate.

It was Howard placing the call.

The footsteps in the hallway resumed, this time headed right for the locker room.



"Dan?" Howard's voice echoed from the hallway.

Dan had slipped to the end of the lockers to the right of the entrance, wedging himself between the shelf and the wall. Howard had entered the doorway, and was now only ten feet away. Dan heard the sound of fabric creasing as the officer bent down to pick something up off the ground. *He must have found my cellphone*, he thought. It was a last resort. Perhaps if the officer found the phone, he'd think it had been left there.

"I know you're in here, Dan."

*No such luck.*

Dan tightened his grip on the baton, holding the base in the crook of his elbow, clinging desperately to the smooth black handle. He looked across the room. A single stall and a urinal were in the corner opposite him. Next to them was a small shower, the curtain drawn. A single wooden bench stood in the middle of the room. There were only a few places for the senior officer to check. Soon after Howard stepped into the room, Dan's hiding place would be revealed.

"I don't have time for this shit," Howard yelled. He hit the side of the lockers, rattling the contents, sending vibrations through to the other end and into Dan's cheek. "I tried to do you a favor, Dan, you know? For old time's sake."

Dan clenched his teeth, felt his body tighten. The senior officer took a few steps forward. He was in the room now.

"I even found your ungrateful daughter."

Dan had had enough.

He leapt from his hiding spot toward the senior officer, swinging the baton sideways with all of his might. Howard turned in anticipation, blocking the blow with his left forearm, and then countered with a blow from his right fist. The punch connected with Dan's ribcage, and he sprawled to the floor next to the wooden bench. He rolled underneath it to the other side, shards of pain running up his side like glass.

Howard grabbed at the underside of the bench, lifting it upwards and into the air. It collapsed on its side, striking Dan on the way down. The officer's biceps rippled under his shirt, his face twisted in anger.

"Am I going to have to kill you myself?" he asked.

Dan glared at him from the floor, still clutching the baton. His back was pressed against the lockers, and pain shot through his body. Howard took a step towards him, straddling the overturned bench.

"Why are you doing this?" Dan wheezed.

"You've done this to yourselves! Every last one of you!" the senior officer screamed. "You deserve it!"

"You're not making sense. What is it that we've done?"

Howard grunted, and then reached down to grab him. Dan swung the baton forward, connecting with the senior officer's knee. Howard cried out in pain, doubling over as his leg caved inwards.

"Motherfucker!"

Dan forced himself to stand, heading around the bench and towards the exit. He could hear Quinn screaming his name from down the hall.

"I'm coming!" he shouted.

He limped ahead, approaching the doorway. Behind him, Howard yelled in pain. Dan was at the doorway now, and he reached behind him to pull the door shut. *I just might make it out of this alive*, he thought.

The door started to swing closed, then stopped with a dull thud as it struck something behind him. *Shit.*

A pair of hands grabbed Dan's shoulders, whipping him around and throwing him across the room. Dan landed on his knees, facing the shower. Howard was behind him now, pulling the curtain open and forcing his head inside. He heard the officer hit the lever, heard the brief pause of water traveling through the pipe, and then felt cold water cascading out of the showerhead and onto his face.

Dan gasped for breath, liquid running up his nose and down his windpipe. Howard pushed him in further, grinding his face against the cement floor and drain, and the water started to puddle. He closed his eyes and pictured Julie's face smiling down at him. Her lips were a soft pink, her eyes a radiant blue.

*Is this how I'm going to die?*

He struggled for what seemed like an eternity, arms flailing backwards, striking at Howard's legs. The man was twice the size that he was. He was hopelessly outmatched. In the background, over the roar of the water, a noise drew him back from the depths. His daughter was still yelling his name.

Dan pictured Quinn on her own, fighting off a slew of the creatures—succumbing to a fate worse than his own. He felt his eyes well up and tear, mixing with the water that would soon drown him, and he propelled his arms backward one last time.

Without warning, Howard's hands retracted and he was free. Dan rolled to the side, out of the shower, and began to spit and cough. His hair was matted across his face, his vision blurry. He wiped the water from his eyes, trying to ascertain what had happened.

*Why did he let me go?*

Three large shapes stood in the room. Dan squinted, discerning Howard's figure among them. The other two shapes were grabbing at the senior officer, and the man had begun to scream.

Dan slid along the back wall, his vision returning.

Attacking Howard were two of the creatures.

The things tore at Howard's chest, ripping off shreds of shirt and skin. The officer was bleeding from a wound in his back, and his face was a mess of blood and fear.

Dan began to run—past the creatures, past his former friend, out the door. The things paused as he flew by, but neither made a grab for him. Apparently, Howard was keeping them occupied.

He slammed the locker room door shut and held the knob. From inside, he heard the senior officer shrieking in pain.

Dan reached for his keys, fumbling for the one that fit the locker room door. When he found it, he inserted it into the keyhole, just as the knob started to turn.

"Dan!" a voice hissed through the door.

He stared for a moment. Howard must have somehow made it across the room, making one last play for the exit. Dan clutched the knob, listening to the sound of nails clawing at the door. He wondered briefly if the fingers belonged to the officer, or the creatures—or both.

From down the hall, his daughter was yelling his name.

Dan let go of the doorknob and started down the corridor towards the jail cell, leaving the door locked behind him.



Howard felt searing pain hit his abdomen, and then his vision began to blur. He struggled to stay on his feet, but the creatures pulled him down to the floor.

*This isn't supposed to happen*, he screamed inside. *I'm supposed to survive.*

He replayed the last few minutes in his mind, trying to figure out where it had all gone wrong. The creatures had come at him from the main office down the hall. He'd heard a crash—had seen them break through the door.

*But I secured this building myself! Dan would have come in through the front entrance—not the office. This place was sealed tight!*

One of the things began gouge into his throat, and he gasped for air.

*How the fuck had they gotten in? Did someone let them inside?*

Howard struggled to break free, but the creatures had him locked in their grip. His stomach felt hot and wet. He looked down in horror to find it had been ripped open. His intestines started to spill from his gut, and he collapsed to the ground. He felt his strength start to fade.

*The Agent leaders*, he thought. *Would they have betrayed me?* They'd told him to return to the station. They'd known he would be here.

His memory flitted back to one of his first conversations with them, almost six years ago. The words came slowly, and he fought to remember through the pain.

*"Each one of you has a purpose. To ensure that the plan is successful, you must do what is instructed of you. Nothing more."*

Maybe his purpose had been served.

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket. They must be calling him now—checking in on him. *Making sure I'm dead...*

The warm feeling in his stomach started to grow cold, and Howard felt his consciousness start to slip. *How could they do this to me?*

"I did everything you asked," he whispered.

The creatures looked up at him, their eyes rabid, and then continued to tear him apart.

**T**HREE DAYS HAD PASSED SINCE Julie's death.

Quinn lay curled up in a ball at Dan's feet. Although the house had two bedrooms, she refused to sleep in them. She'd insisted on sleeping on the living room floor, in the center of the house, just a few feet from her father.

Dan smiled grimly at her, watching her chest rise and fall. In the distance, he heard a long scream—whether it was from a human or one of the creatures, he wasn't sure. He stared across the room, to a pile of guns and ammunition that he had raided from the police station. It was nighttime, and he didn't dare go outside to investigate. Even in the daytime, such firepower did little to quell his nerves.

It had been Quinn's suggestion to stay here—and in hindsight, a damn good one.

Howard's home was equipped with steel doors on either side. Each had a quarter-inch metal bar that fit snugly into threaded supports along the frame. The windows contained thick metal borders, and each was made of bulletproof glass. The officer had stockpiled food throughout the house. The second bedroom contained three shelves full of dry goods, and the basement contained several freezers and refrigerators. The man had been prepared for what happened.

Since arriving, Dan had rummaged through the whole house, searching for clues as to what was happening. In the process, he had uncovered several garbage bags full of unused groceries in the trashcan out back. He had quickly identified a pattern.

All the new food had been purchased in the last two weeks. Everything else had been discarded.

Whatever was happening to St. Matthews seemed to be connected to the food and water supply. So far, Dan and Quinn hadn't been affected, but he wondered if it was a matter of time.

After their arrival, Dan had ventured outside three times, but close calls with the creatures had sent him back into the house in a hurry. He hadn't seen any signs of other survivors. The power was still on, but he wasn't sure how long it would last.

He had warned Quinn to stay away from the windows. In fact, they had kept the blinds closed throughout the house to avoid being seen by the creatures. A few times, they had watched some of the things hunting around the neighborhood, creeping in corners and sliding along walls. Dan had located a pair of binoculars in one of the drawers, and he studied the creature's movements with growing dread. If they had been infected with some disease, they showed no signs of slowing down.

Dan stood up from the couch, tiptoeing past his sleeping daughter, and parted the living room blinds. The night was still. There were only a few other houses on the street, and their lights remained off. He hadn't seen a hint of movement inside them for the past few days. He felt a pang of guilt that he hadn't checked all of them, but he couldn't bear the thought of leaving his daughter alone. He had already lost her once.

Dan thought back to what Quinn had told him— about the text message she had seen on Howard's phone.

*Every last one must go.*

Somewhere, others knew what was coming, as well. They had planned this. The thought made him sick to his stomach. Dan heard his daughter stir from behind him. He let go of the blinds and returned to

her side.



Breakfast was jelly on bread, untoasted, and a bowl of Cheerios in milk. Dan had been avoiding the oven and the toaster, afraid that the smells might draw the attention of the creatures. The milk in Howard's fridge hadn't yet expired. It made sense to use it up. They had enough food in the house to last for a while, but he knew they couldn't stay there forever.

Sooner or later, they'd need to make their escape.

Howard didn't have a phone in the house. On his few journeys out, Dan had tried to call for help—using both landlines and his cellphone. Not a single call had gone through. It was as if the whole world was dead. Try as he might, he was unable to push the awful thought from his mind.

Quinn sat across from him at the kitchen table, her mouth full of Cheerios. For a split second, Dan felt a sense of normalcy, as if today could have been any other day, as if she would soon head off to school and he to work.

"Are we going to put more food in the car, Daddy?"

"Yes, I think that's a good idea," he said.

Over the past few days, they had been transferring food from Howard's house to the Outback. Dan wanted to stock it up in case they had to leave suddenly. Each time, he had filled a small cooler—enough to carry with one hand, but not enough to prevent him from carrying his gun in the other—and moved its contents into the vehicle. Quinn would keep watch out the windows, the door locked behind her, until he returned.

So far, they hadn't run into any trouble, but Dan knew that their luck could change at any minute. Which was why they needed to leave St. Matthews. It wasn't safe here. He held out hope that somewhere beyond the White Mountains, things were better. That he could provide safety for his daughter.

That he could come to terms with his wife's death.

In the chaos and insanity, Dan hadn't had time to accept the reality of Julie's passing. Hell—he hadn't even been given a chance to grieve. There had been little discussion of returning home. It wasn't safe, and he didn't want Quinn to see her mother's body. The girl had been through enough.

Quinn gulped down the last bite of her Cheerios, and tilted the bowl to drink the milk from the bottom. At home, Julie would have told her to mind her manners. Now, Dan let out a guarded smile.

"Good to the last drop, huh?"

She nodded. Quinn stood, bowl in hand, and headed towards the sink. She rinsed the bowl quietly and then placed it on the counter. The spoon fell from her grip, and pinged off the basin below.

"Shhhh..." he warned.

"I know, Daddy," she returned.

She reached over to the window above the sink and parted the blinds.

"I wish we could go outside," she said. "It seems like such a beautiful day."

A ray of sunshine cleared the countertop and hit the floor. Dan followed it back up to the window, still smiling.

He bolted upright in his chair.

One of the creatures was pressing its face against the pane, eyes glazed and overcast. It rapped at the glass with its knuckles, feeling for a way in. Quinn stifled a scream.

They had been discovered.





Dan made a run for the living room to the pile of weapons. He grabbed a pistol, and then dashed for the front blinds. He peered outside, looking for signs of movement. The road was empty, the houses across the street undisturbed. The Outback sat in the driveway. There was no sign of the thing from the backyard.

But he was sure it would make its way around eventually.

Quinn stood behind him, holding the back of his shirt.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she whispered.

"It's not your fault, Quinn," he said.

And he meant it. None of it was. Not one single thing.

"Get the cooler ready. Pack it as full as you can," he instructed. "And bring it back to the living room. Stay clear of the blinds."

She nodded and started upstairs. Dan followed the windows one by one to the back of the house, scanning for the intruder. He finally found it, hovering by the side of the house. It looked up at him through the glass, seeming to sense his presence. Its teeth were caked with yellow and red, its skin a dull gray. It reached up towards him and groped at the window. He dropped the blinds. With only one creature outside, they should still be safe. They'd wait it out until the thing lost interest. It shouldn't be able to get inside.

He heard a bang from upstairs.

"Are you all right up there?" he called.

"Yes, Dad. I'm almost done."

He made his way back to the living room. A black tote bag lay on the floor next to the weapons. He began to fill it with as much as he could carry: ammunition, guns, and batons, as well as a bulletproof vest. When he finished, he lifted the bag and deposited it near the front door. It was best to be prepared. He returned to the windows.

This time Dan did a double take. A horde of creatures was making its way down the road, headed in their direction. Arms and legs swayed back and forth, heads bobbed, and limbs tangled as they moved in one mass. Although he was unable to count them all, he guessed there were at least twenty of the things.

He sucked in a breath, envisioning their lives in the days to come. They could hide in the house for while, living off the food that Howard had left. Wait for help to arrive. But what if the creatures kept coming, and what if they found a way in? And more importantly, what if no help came? Try as he might, Dan couldn't help but envision the house as their tomb.

He couldn't allow that to happen.

He needed to get his daughter to safety, no matter what it took. This might be their last chance at escape.

"Quinn, it's time!" he yelled, trying his best to sound calm.

"Coming!"

She bounded down the stairs, the cooler swinging in front of her.

"What are you looking at? What do you see, Dad?" she asked, inching closer.

"Listen, Quinn. I'm going to need your help here. We need to move fast," he began. She started to shake. He locked eyes with her. "When I open this door, I need you to get to the car and get inside. Don't look around—just lock the doors. I'll be right behind you."

"Dad, I'm scared!"

"We're going to get out of here, and we're going to get help," he assured her.

She clung on to his shirt, crying now. His heart felt like a stone in his chest. She looked into his eyes and nodded. Dan moved towards the front door, carrying the tote bag. He lifted the metal rod from the holders and unlocked it. Through the screen, he could see the swarm of creatures getting closer.

"Oh my God..." Quinn whispered.

"Don't look. When I open the door, run straight to the car."

He handed her the key, and gave her one last look before pushing open the screen door. His daughter took off in front of him, and he prayed that he had made the right decision in leaving. He threw the tote bag into the front yard, and retrieved the pistol from the floor. He then slammed the door shut behind him and stepped outside.

Quinn was almost at the car already, her legs pumping against the walkway. She carried the cooler in front of her. She was at the passenger's side door now, unlocking the vehicle. The creatures broke into a run, fanning out across the street. Dan grabbed the weapons bag and began to sprint. Adrenaline coursed through his arms, and he held the pistol sideways at the approaching mob.

The tote bag tangled in something, and he stopped short, losing his grip on it. He glanced behind him. The creature from the backyard had snagged it, and the thing dove into him, clawing at his leg and pulling him onto the grass. Dan yelled in surprise, and the gun flew from his hands.

"Daddy!"

Quinn had opened the car door, but instead of getting inside, she stood next to it and yelled his name.

"Get in and lock the doors!" he cried out.

The creature locked its grip on his pants, and he felt nails dig into his skin. He kicked backwards at it. He was pinned. Quinn got back in the car and shut the door behind her.

Footsteps hit the grass around him. The others had entered the property, and he heard them groaning in unison. He pushed up from the ground, trying to shake the thing loose. The creature clung on to his back, unrelenting.

The car horn sounded.

Dan looked to his left. A few of the creatures started to move towards the car.

"Quinn—no! Don't draw their attention!"

He wrenched his back to the side, and the creature began to loosen its grasp. He swung an elbow backwards, felt the crunch of bone behind him as it connected with the thing's face. Suddenly he was free.

Dan regained his footing and stumbled toward the car. Several other creatures lunged in his direction, but he weaved from side to side, dodging them.

Finally he reached the driver's side door. Quinn had stopped hitting the horn, and she threw open the door to allow him access. He jumped inside.

Quinn had already started the engine. Dan threw the vehicle into reverse and careened out of the driveway, the car door still swinging open behind him.

**D**an maneuvered the Outback through St. Matthews, the streets lifeless and empty. Even in the daylight, porch lights still burned in front of some of the houses. Doors were left open; windows were smashed. Quinn sat upright in the passenger seat next to him biting her nails.

They passed by a carcass on the side of the road. A few birds picked at the remains, and then scattered at the sight of the approaching car. Farther ahead, a creature emerged from a driveway, holding a fistful of hair. Quinn stared, unable to look away.

"Close your eyes," he said, knowing she wouldn't.

Dan continued driving toward the outskirts of town. The houses grew more infrequent. He looked down at the gas gauge, which showed that the tank was half empty. They would need more than that to have a fighting chance. There was a gas station about a mile up the road—the last one in town before heading into the White Mountains.

He saw it now, up ahead, and he pulled into the parking lot next to the pumps, hoping they were still operational. He grabbed the pistol from his holster—the only weapon he'd managed to salvage—and left the car running.

The gas station was deserted. The front windows had been smashed, and items of food and clothing were strewn across the front entrance. Dan scanned in all directions, finding nothing. He opened the car door, gripping the weapon, and popped the gas tank.

The pumps appeared functional—their lights indicated the price of gas, and options for payment. Dan pulled his wallet out and removed his debit card. He chuckled slightly. Even at the end of existence, the oil companies were still making out like bandits. He contemplated going inside to search for supplies, but decided against it. He had risked enough. They needed to get as far away from St. Matthews as possible.

Dan topped off the tank, and then opened the trunk, where he kept a gas can. He filled it to the top, replaced the spout cap and put it back in the vehicle. He got back into the car and locked the door.

"Dad?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Where are we going to go?"

"Away from here. Things will be better once we get out of town," he said.

"Do you promise?" Quinn looked at him, her eyes wide.

"I promise."

Dan pulled out from the gas station and into the road. Up ahead, Route 191 wound up into the mountains, providing a bridge to the outside world. He hit the gas and felt the car accelerate, and then rolled his window down, letting in the fresh morning air.

*They have to get better*, he told himself. They sure as hell couldn't get any worse.

**TO BE CONTINUED....**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**T.W. PIPERBROOK WAS BORN AND** raised in Connecticut. He has been writing since childhood, but *Contamination* is his first published work. In addition to writing, the author has spent time as a full-time touring musician, touring across the US, Canada, and Europe.

He now lives with his wife, a son, and a Boston Terrier that hates squirrels.

# REVIEWS

If you enjoyed Contamination Zero, please consider leaving a positive review. Reviews are a HUGE help in allowing other readers to find works they enjoy, and they allow me to do what I love most: keep writing! If you have a comment or question about CONTAMINATION, please drop me a line. I'd love to hear from you!

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## PART ONE—EXODUS



## White Mist, New Mexico

Population: 1

**S**URROUNDED BY WHIPPING SAND AND dust, the brown sign stood resilient at the town's perimeter. Sam Cook could still make out the faded sticker that had been placed over the single numeric digit on its face, even though it had been a few years. That was how the DOT amended things these days. If a change were small enough, a patch would suffice to update the information.

He could've requested a new sign—hell, he was now the only resident of the town. But the thin border around the number reminded him of the sign's previous digit. It was one he did not want to forget.

He imagined a byline that should have been placed underneath:

*White Mist, New Mexico*

*Former Population: 3.*

Sam had only lived in town with his wife and daughter for two years before the tragedy had occurred. Together, they had rebuilt the historic log cabin store, turning it into a small-scale tourist attraction. Purchasing the town had been a lifelong dream, and they had poured all their efforts into it.

Because the White Mist store contained a post office, it qualified for its own zip code. Several families had once resided there, but they had long since relocated. The previous owners were an elderly couple from Iowa. They had decided to sell the property when the upkeep became too much to handle.

Sam's family had spent long hours renovating the property, and he was proud of what they had accomplished. He liked to think that after a few short years, the White Mist Trading Post had become not only a pit stop for gas and beverages, but a piece of history and a symbol of the American West.

A bit of a stretch, perhaps. But now, the store was all he had.

The shelves were adorned with a variety of commemorative merchandise: White Mist shirts, mugs, key chains, and hats. It didn't cost much to produce them, and they helped tremendously in keeping the place afloat, and in keeping his family clothed and fed.

Of course, now there was only one mouth to feed.

At the moment, the store was empty. Sam wiped a trickle of sweat from his brow and paused. In front of him was a half-empty shelf of dried noodles. On the floor was the box of replenishments. He needed a break.

He moved towards the screen door at the entrance, listening to the floor squeak underneath him. The door seemed ready to expire; it creaked on its hinges, begging for relief. The place needed work. He tried his best to keep it up, but there was only so much he could do alone.

He surveyed the empty parking lot in front of him. Beyond it was an equally deserted portion of I-40. The southwestern desert stretched endlessly for miles, composed of scorching, earthy landscape, with occasional patches of green that helped offset the brown scenery. In the distance, a few mountains

rose skyward, as if to indicate that all was not flat. Oftentimes, Sam felt the urge to cross the road and traverse the magnificent ranges, watching his store become a speck on the landscape below.

On the horizon, he saw what looked like a tractor-trailer barreling down the interstate. The setting sun glinted off its hood, capturing the last glimmers of daylight in its grill. Overhead, a lone hawk circled, probably already watching its unsuspecting prey.

The truck looked like it was slowing down. Sam used the top of his sleeve to wipe another bead of perspiration from his forehead, unknowingly smearing a line of dirt in a half-circle. He went inside.

He heard the driver pumping the brakes, and then the truck tires crunched to a halt. Through the screen windows of the store, he saw the words 'All-American Beef' emblazoned on the side. The driver's window was rolled all the way up, and Sam was unable to see through the tinted glass.

A sudden fear coursed through his body, making him shiver slightly.

"What the hell?" he muttered to himself. "It's gotta be like ninety-eight degrees out."

Sam had grown accustomed to talking to himself. It felt good to keep a monologue going, especially when no one else was there to judge or listen. In this case, however, the one-sided conversation was an attempt to calm his nerves.

What was he afraid of? Trucks came through White Mist all day long, filling up on diesel gasoline, taking a break from the open road.

But this one seemed different.

Outside, the hawk swooped lazily. It had either lost sight of its target, or it was still toying with it. The truck sat in silence. There was no sign of movement from the driver.

Sam glanced over at the floor, to the box of noodles. For some reason, he felt like he should continue to unpack it—to act as natural as possible. But that would leave him unprepared. For what, he wasn't sure.

Beneath the cash register, strapped underneath the shelf, he kept a loaded rifle. It had been there so long, he imagined it was covered with a layer of dust—hell, he wasn't even sure it worked anymore. He mentally traced the steps from where he stood to the cash register.

Six or seven steps. That's what he would need to reach the counter. Sam stood at six foot one inches and weighed 180 lbs. He had long strides.

"This is ridiculous." He forced a smile. "I am being ridiculous."

As if in response, the truck door swung open with a groan, and a short man with a baseball cap hopped out into the parking lot. Sam jumped slightly.

"Whew!" the trucker yelled to no one in particular. "It is damn hot out today!"

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. He considered going out to greet the customer. Instead, he stuck to the noodles.

The trucker bounded through the door with a flurry of conversation. Sam imagined the man had been talking the entire trip, with or without an audience.

"Howdy, sir! I need me a drink. It's hot as blazes out there!"

"Welcome to White Mist!" Sam welcomed him. "The cooler is to the left. Before you ask, yes—I am the population of one."

"I kinda figured that!" the guy chuckled. "But I'm sure you get that question all the time."

"You wouldn't believe it!" Sam pretended to groan. But he liked the casual banter, the harmless jokes. It helped him take his mind off other, more serious things.

The trucker brought his purchase to the register and paid in cash. Sam counted back the change and shut the drawer, watching him leave the store. His rifle remained untouched on its perch below the counter.

He returned to stocking the shelf, lining up the noodles next to each other. He must be getting jittery in his old age. Or maybe the isolation was starting to manifest itself as anxiety. Either way, he was looking forward to closing up shop in just a few hours and heading to his trailer home next door.

There, he knew, a small brown package awaited him. Earlier in the day, he had received a UPS parcel delivery. Unlike his usual scheduled shipments, this one did not pertain to the store. In his spare time, Sam had taken to building and collecting model cars.

The newest kit was a green 1929 Ford Model "A" Roadster. Comprised of metal and plastic, the kit was made up of 267 pieces. He enjoyed the precision required to complete the kits: gluing, painting, securing wheels to axles. Sam allowed himself this one outlet at the end of the day. His last project had taken him several months to complete. He smiled at the thought of starting another one.

He didn't hear his next customer come through the door until the screen creaked on its hinges and slammed shut.

"Welcome to White Mist," Sam called out. He smiled, and then decided to add: "The best thing west of Roswell!"

He was greeted by silence. A dark figure had emerged from behind the shelf. The visitor seemed to have floated across the room.

The man had a pale, lifeless expression. His mouth was clamped shut, and his face looked as if it had aged unnaturally, sucking his dark facial hair into the folds of his cheeks. A scar ran sideways across his throat. The skin around it appeared jagged and flaky, as if it had been picked at during the healing process.

His black eyes seemed to pierce through the storeowner.

The figure was not amused.

***Contamination 1: The Onset*** [Available Here](#) ***on Amazon***

# **Affliction Z: Patient Zero**

## **(Book One)**

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# Chapter 1

Sean Ryder prepared himself for what would end up being the final HALO jump of his career. He clung tightly to the yellow length of cord that kept him from being swept out of the rear of the C-160. No more than thirty feet from where he stood was the platform, lowered and ready for the men to jump. A dozen men lined up, ready to free fall for twenty thousand feet or more before deploying their chutes. Their calls of bravado steadied the men in the face of danger. Anything could go wrong. It rarely did, but the possibility was there and it preyed on the minds of each man.

From twenty-five thousand feet in the air, the Earth looked like scaled scenery that might have been used in an old movie. But Sean didn't see the ground. None of the men did, not tonight. The tops of dull gray clouds flew by a few thousand feet below the plane. Once in a while, there was a break in the cloud cover and Sean saw glimpses of darkened Earth. Blackness left behind by a sun that set five hours ago, its charred remains stretching across the landscape.

The SEALs made their jumps, one by one, in quick succession, with no hesitation, no fear, no bullshit. They were warriors in every sense of the word.

SEALs were like that, thought Sean.

He turned to his partner, Jules Hoover, and said, "We're up."

Jules winked and headed for the platform.

They had to move, and both men knew it. Waiting much longer would put them further away from the team they were attached to. The SEALs wouldn't wait around long, if at all. Not in hostile territory. Not for a couple of Air Force Pararescuemen, otherwise known as PJs.

In a flash, Jules took off down the ramp and dove head first, arms out, legs spread wide. When Sean reached the ledge, Jules had disappeared into the night sky.

"These things we do, that others may live," Sean said to himself. The PJ motto. He repeated it to himself at the start of every mission, every time he had to use deadly force against another human being, and every time he risked his life to save another.

He reached into his top pocket, pulled out a photograph. He stared at the two smiling faces, both framed by long brown hair. He kissed the image of his wife, Kathy, did the same to the image of his daughter, Emma. He thought back to the words Emma whispered to him right before he left for this mission.

*Please stay safe, Daddy.*

Sean smiled. At four years old, his daughter had no idea what he did. She knew he was in the Air Force and that his job involved saving people. He figured that she picked up on some of Kathy's anxiety of his missions, and that's why she insisted that he stay safe.

Knowing that his window to jump was closing, Sean took one last look at the photo, whispered, "I'll be home soon, ladies," and tucked the picture away in a spot he knew it would remain safe. From that point on, he had to focus on his job. He compartmentalized the two women in his life, tucked them away in a spot where he knew they were there, but his thoughts of them wouldn't interfere with the job he had to do. It was something he learned to do long ago. It kept him, and those around him, alive.

No matter how many times he'd jumped, he'd never managed to get rid of the anxious feelings that preceded plummeting to the Earth at terminal velocity. His stomach knotted, sweat dripped profusely, his chest tightened, his lungs constricted. But the panic and anxiety never stopped him. Not tonight. Not any night. Sean knew that extended periods of anxiety could cause hypoxia, so he allowed himself a panic window of fifteen seconds. Ten before the jump, five after.

He traveled down the platform, his movements silent against the roar of the rushing wind. He propelled himself off the ledge, head first, arms out, feet wide. Then gravity took over and he repositioned himself to travel like a bullet.

The first few moments of a jump were always terrifying. Questions raced through Sean's mind. They were the same every time. *What if I fail to maintain control of my body? What if atmospheric conditions blow me off course and into enemy hands? What if my chute doesn't open? What if my backup fails to deploy in time?* The questions passed through him like grains of sand through a child's fingers. He continued toward the Earth, and the powerful upper level winds that Sean knifed through carried his doubts away, like dust in a sandstorm.

With terminal velocity achieved, Sean let his training and instincts take over. By this point in his career, he had enough jumps to his credit that the process was as close to automatic as it could get. His only concerns were how far he'd have to travel to rejoin the group, and whether or not the journey would be wrought with danger. He knew that Jules would be close by and the man would wait for Sean to rendezvous with him before moving on. Together, they could take on a dozen regular men and half a dozen soldiers, so long as they didn't have the same type of training.

At twenty-five hundred feet, Sean pulled his ripcord. Nothing happened. The first twinges of panic surfaced and were subsequently beaten away by Sean's extensive training and preparation. He deployed his reserve and prepared for the worst. His reserve parachute opened and he felt his body jerk to a crawl. At least that was how it felt after plummeting at a speed of over one hundred and twenty miles per hour.

Floating through the air afforded Sean a chance to scan the area for other members of the team. Using a pair of night vision goggles, he located what he assumed was Jules's parachute. A moment later, he saw the grainy dark green outline of his partner, and the first leg of his journey was confirmed. Sean kept his eyes on his partner's location until he hit the ground. The landing wasn't as rough as he had expected it to be. It wasn't great, either, but he managed to get up and walk away, and for Sean, that constituted a successful jump.

Adrenaline streamed through his body, pumping with every rapid beat of his heart. He gathered up his parachute then headed in the direction of Jules's landing spot. He had to remind himself to proceed with extreme caution. No immediate danger had been expected, but he knew they wouldn't be in the area if there wasn't a damn good reason. Rarely did they get this far into a mission without details about where they were going and what they would do once they arrived. Yet, here they were, in the wilds of southern Nigeria, a few miles north of the snaking Niger River, and no one could tell him anything other than *jump*.

Sean reached Jules's landing spot and found his partner crouching low, facing the opposite direction. He dropped to his stomach, crawled toward Jules.

"Something's out there," Jules said.

"What?" Sean said.

"Not sure. I heard it. Saw it for a second. It rushed in, then back out."

"Animal?"

"Bi-pedal, man. It ran in on two feet, then took off."

"You don't think it was Bates or Schmittie messing with you?"

Jules shrugged and appeared to contemplate the question. On the half dozen or so missions they'd run with this platoon, Bates and Schmittie always came up with a way to screw with Jules. Last time they'd been attached, the two guys got Jules piss drunk on tequila. When he passed out, they stuck him in an emergency raft and dragged him a quarter mile out into the Caspian Sea. Sean got the call at daybreak and had to figure out how to get his partner back to land.

"C'mon, forget about it" Sean said. "We need to catch up with them. I've got no idea where we're heading."

"Me either," Jules said. He hopped to his feet, started moving.

Sean reequipped his night vision then caught up to his partner. They walked side by side, both of them scanning the area in front of them and to the sides, and occasionally behind. Their MP7s moved with their eyes, ready to eliminate any threats.

"Did you see them land?" Sean asked in a hushed voice.

"Yeah," Jules replied. "They were a good half-mile away. Guess we took more wind shear than they did."

Sean felt like he'd managed to land pretty close to his target. Of course, an accurate gauge of distance was harder from five miles in the air, especially in the dark. His initial trajectory from the plane could have been off an inch or two and that would have made a big difference.

Sean heard a scattering sound to his right. He twisted his head and stared into the thick vegetation. He looked up and down, left and right, focusing on one six-foot section at a time. The branches stood out, almost white, in the greenish hue of the goggles. The sound stopped almost as soon as it began. Sean decided to ignore it and continue on.

*Probably wildlife.*

"Think they're waiting?" Jules said.

"No," Sean said. "Call 'em and tell them to stop or at least slow down. I don't want them to get too far ahead."

"Okay," Jules said.

Sean heard another sound, again to his right. Footsteps scurrying across the ground, close by, then retreating. He spun to his right, heard Jules do the same.

"What the frig?" Jules said.

Sean said nothing as he scanned the area, looking for any sign of what made the noise.

"Did you see that, Sean?"

"See what?"

"That... thing?"

"I didn't see anything."

But was that the truth? Sean thought through the sequence of events. He'd heard the sound approach and turned as whatever had created the noise retreated into the brush. He had scanned a large area of bushes and trees. He'd seen it. A human figure had ducked in between two bushes.

Jules approached the area, slowly and cautiously.

"What're you doing?" Sean said. He remained rooted to the same spot.



"I want to know what that is," Jules called back.

"Screw it, man. It's gone and we need to catch up to Turk and the others. Keep your eyes open and stay alert."

Jules stood in place, facing the thick vegetation. His elbows were tight to his side. His arms out, hidden from Sean's view by Jules's torso. He pivoted left to right. Sean saw the barrel of the man's H&K MP7 poke out on the side.

"Jules," Sean said, maybe a notch too loud. "Let's move."

"All right," Jules said, turning. "Damn mind playing tricks on me. Swore I saw eyes reflecting from in there."

Sean chuckled, managing to find something humorous in the situation. He imagined them being stalked by a pack of feral cats.

Ten pounds of pure terror.

A scream that could rival that of a banshee erupted from within the bushes. Time slowed down. Sean saw Jules twist around. The man's arms went up into a protective gesture. The weapon in his hands rose to a spot in front of his face to deflect a blow. Jules's body bowed back at his knees. He looked like he was trying to win a limbo competition, only the bar was coming after him.

Sean reacted before his mind could fully process the sight of a naked human, or humanoid, rushing toward him. Its mouth hung wide open, strands of saliva connected between upper and lower teeth. Its eyes seemed to glow. Sean lifted his pistol into the air. It was his only defense, as he hadn't yet removed his MP7. He squeezed off three shots. Each one hit dead center. The man that approached jerked back at first, then staggered backward. It released another furious howl. Pain? Anger? Then it began another approach.

"What the...?" Sean said. Unfortunately, his brain had caught up and was busy trying to make sense of what had happened. Even a man high on PCP would have had more of a reaction than this guy had after three 9mm bullets to the chest. He should be on the ground sucking in his dying breaths, yet here he was, standing and looking even more pissed off.

Sean aimed, fired two more rounds. One hit the man in the stomach and the guy bowed forward. The other shot hit him in his shoulder, and the man jerked back to the left, his body twisting at the waist.

Sean cursed himself for allowing his nerves to affect his aim. He dropped to one knee in an effort to steady himself. The man was now close enough that Sean had to make his next shot count, or it might be his last.

The guy straightened, dropped his head back. He released a scream that drowned out the ambient sounds of the night. It started low and sounded guttural. *Primal*. Then it became high and shrill. The sound was deafening, and Sean wondered if maybe it was an attempt to call another person to his position.

Sean lifted his weapon and took aim, but before he could squeeze the trigger, the man sprinted toward him, moving faster than he'd ever seen a human run. The next thing he knew, the guy was right in front of him, arms out and back at the elbows, fingers curled up like claws, mouth open and teeth glinting in the moonlight. The guy carried the smell of rotten and decaying flesh and human waste. Blood leaked from the bullet holes that riddled the man's body. He breathed heavily, wheezing with each inhale and exhale.

*This was no man.*

The roar of three-burst semi-automatic gunfire erupted from behind the man. The bullets appeared to hit him in the mid to upper back, because the guy stopped and his stomach extended out while his shoulders pulled back. His open, vicious mouth contorted in a pained expression. Another burst of gunfire tore through the night and ripped through the man's head, tearing a good chunk of the right side off. Blood and bone and brain hovered in the air, and then rained to the ground.

Sean fell back and rolled out of the way. He lay flat on his stomach and aimed at the *being*, which still stood, though appeared lifeless. At last, it fell forward, the remains of its face hitting the packed earth, Jules standing a foot behind the space it had occupied.

"What the fuck was that?" Sean yelled.

Jules shook his head, said nothing.

Sean got to his feet, walked around the body on the ground. He noticed Jules standing still, mouth open, eyes glassy and focused on the corpse on the ground.

"Jules?" Sean said.

His partner said nothing in return. He continued to stare at the body.

Sean lifted his goggles and shone a light on the body on the ground. It was pale, almost blue. Half of its face was exposed. An open mouth revealed red gums and dirty, yellow-and-brown teeth. Deep-purple circles rimmed its eyes. Dark bruises littered its upper back and thighs. Sean wanted to see its stomach, but decided against touching the remains. The fear, he thought, was irrational, but he knew he had every right to trust his instincts.

Sean's radio clicked on, and through a faint trace of static, a deep voice spoke. "Ryder, Jules? Come in." It was Turk, the SEAL team leader.

"Ryder," Sean said.

"What are you two clowns doing back there? We heard gunfire."

"That was us. We're okay," Sean said.

"Care to tell me what happened?" Turk asked.

Sean looked at Jules, who appeared to have regained some sense. Jules shook his head and in a hushed tone said, "Don't tell them."

Sean licked his lips and pressed the transmit button on his radio. "Wild boar or some shit."

"Wild boar?" Turk said. "That was a hell of a lot of gunfire for a friggin' pig, Ryder."

"Yeah," Sean said. "We thought there were more behind the bushes."

"Whatever," Turk said. "You two need to hustle and get your asses over here. I'm serious, double time it. I got no idea who's out here waiting for us, but I do know that you two numb nuts alerted them to our presence. Out."

Sean reattached his radio to his belt. "Not who," he muttered. "What." He bumped into Jules's shoulder and began walking away from the lifeless body on the ground, hoping to forget about the encounter.

"Turk's right," Jules said.

Sean waited for him to continue, but when Jules said nothing else, Sean said, "How's that?"

Jules turned his head ninety degrees and looked at Sean. He, too, had removed his goggles. His dark brown eyes reflected the moon as tiny white circles. "He ain't got no idea what's out here. We've seen it, and we ain't got a clue."

Sean said nothing. He started walking and picked up the pace once they were a few yards away. He wanted to put as much distance between himself and the body of

that *thing* as he could. If they encountered another one, he didn't want to be alone. And the SEALs wouldn't wait all night.

## Chapter 2

They moved quickly, quietly, deliberately. Their eyes scanned the territory in front of them and behind them, non-stop. Sean maintained radio silence, a precaution in the event that their gunfire had alerted someone of their presence.

Sean couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard howls that sounded more human than animal. Feral humans, he thought. Could that be what that *thing* was?

It took fifteen minutes for Sean and Jules to reach the SEAL team, which indicated to Sean that the SEALs had held position after they heard the attack.

Sean wanted to locate Turk so he could avoid him. He knew the man would again ask what happened. If Sean lied a second time, it would show on his face. Keeping Jules away from Turk was also a high priority because he appeared to still be on edge over the situation. Every couple hundred feet or so during their journey, Jules would mutter something to the effect of, "What the frig was that thing? Never seen no man take that kind of damage and keep moving." Sean had to constantly remind his partner to keep quiet in case there were more of those *things* around.

Jules's question and observation were legit, as far as Sean was concerned. He'd completed PJ training over ten years ago. During that time, he'd been in some of the worst places imaginable. He'd seen people wounded in any of a hundred different ways. He'd had to use deadly force on a number of occasions in an effort to complete a mission.

Through it all, he'd never seen someone handle a catastrophic injury and keep on coming. Perhaps, as he guessed, they weren't dealing with a someone. But what, then? An alien? He chuckled at the thought.

Jules turned his head. His thick eyebrows were furrowed over his dark eyes. "What the frig are you laughing about?"

Sean shrugged, brushed off Jules's question. Not because he wanted to ignore the man, though. He had locked eyes with Turk, and the SEAL was crossing camp, heading in their direction.

Turk was one of the most intimidating men Sean had ever been around. It wasn't only his physical traits. All SEALs were built and fast and tough. Turk had something else about him. The guy had close to twenty years in the Navy, almost all of them as a SEAL. Two of those years had been spent in a dirt hole four foot wide and ten foot deep, crisscrossed iron bars at the top, trapping him inside. One day, his captors made a mistake and forgot to lock down the gate atop the hole. According to Turk, he waited an hour or so for the sun to set, and then scaled the muddy walls. He said he left one of his captors alive, but only after removing the man's genitals and forcing him to eat them. A warning, he said, that they should never fuck with SEALs. Turk was legendary within the SEAL community. Hell, he was legendary in the Special Forces community. It always gave Sean a sense of calm when Turk was in charge of a mission.

"What's wrong with him?" Turk said, nodding at Jules.

Sean hesitated. If he said the wrong thing, Turk would know he was bullshitting him. And if he took too long to answer, Turk would grow suspicious. More so than he appeared to be.

"Well?" Turk said. "Your tongues tired from making out on the way over here?"

A few members of the SEAL team turned to look. Sean saw grins plastered on their faces. He knew that if he was going to tell Turk what happened, the two of them should step away from the camp. It was as much to prevent rumors of Sean's impending lunacy as it was to prevent panic among the ranks.

"Turk," Sean said. "Let's talk over there." He pointed to a distant spot.

"All right," Turk said. "What about him?" He gestured toward Jules again.

Sean looked at his partner. The man looked lost and Sean figured that Jules would be better off staying behind.

"He'll wait here," Sean said.

They walked in silence for fifty yards. Sean remained alert. He'd armed himself with his H&K MP7 and affixed the suppressor. The bullets weren't any stronger than his 9mm, but he could fire in a semi-automatic burst of three rounds, giving him a greater chance of incapacitating his target.

"What are you so sketchy about, Ryder?" Turk asked.

"Turk," Sean said, "it wasn't a boar."

"No shit."

Sean was glad he didn't attempt to lie to the man.

"We were attacked," Sean said.

"Why didn't you say so?" Turk said.

"In case we lost integrity of our communications. I didn't want to endanger you. We were passing through an area that you guys hadn't. As far as they knew, Jules and I were alone."

Turk nodded. "Okay, go on."

Sean took a deep breath, looked up at the thinly veiled moon, then exhaled. "It came out of the bushes."

"It?" Turk crossed his arms and leaned back.

"You heard all the shots, yeah?"

Turk nodded.

"That was for one, uh, man," Sean said.

"Eleven frickin' shots?" Turk widened his stance as he took a step back.

Sean nodded. The story sounded better in his head, believable. But as the words left his mouth, he knew that he'd have a hard time convincing Turk of what happened.

"I'm calling bullshit. You guys gotta be better shots than that. I don't care if you are Air Force." He paused and grinned momentarily over his jab at Sean. "I want to see the damn body."

"Turk," Sean said. "You don't want to do that. There's more I have to tell—"

Turk had already turned and was jogging toward camp. He stopped and yelled for two of the men to meet him, then he turned back toward Sean. "C'mon, Ryder. You're taking us to the body."

Sean wondered what the hell he'd gotten himself into.

"Jules going to accompany us?" Turk asked.

Sean shook his head. No way he'd lead Jules back down that path. The guy might go insane by the time they made it back to camp.

"You remember where you left the body?" Turk asked.

"Yeah," Sean replied. "I remember."

They started back in the direction of the attack. Sean walked fast, having already been through the territory and feeling more comfortable about his chances with three

members of SEAL Team 8 surrounding him. If another one of those *things* attacked, the men would be on it like white on rice. They'd fill it so full of holes it wouldn't have a chance to reach them.

They found the location where the thing had attacked, but the body was gone.

"What?" Turk asked, likely wondering why Sean had stopped.

"I don't understand," Sean said. "It was here. We left the body where it fell."

"You sure this is the right spot?" Turk said.

Sean nodded. He panned his flashlight on the ground, stopped when spent shells glinted in the light.

"Those are proof," Sean said. "This is where it happened."

"Blood," Spencer said. "Pool of it here. It looks like your guy was dragged into the brush over there." He shone his light in a zigzag pattern against the dense vegetation.

"Don't do that," Sean said.

Turk said, "So there was more than one guy, huh Ry—"

A scream erupted from beyond the trail of blood. "*Whoooo-aaaaaaah.*" Low to high, guttural and primal.

"The hell was that?" Turk said.

A similar-sounding scream ripped through the still night from the opposite direction, maybe a hundred yards or so from where they stood. The ambient sounds of nature disappeared, giving way to the echo of the screams.

"We need to move," Sean said. He hadn't had time to allow fear to invade his psyche at the time of the earlier attack. It was kill or die at that time. But now, after knowing what those *things* were capable of, and the set of shrieks indicating that he and the SEALs weren't alone, he found himself wishing that he and Jules hadn't been called upon for this mission. What was the mission? Was this the reason why they hadn't been told why they were out here? Someone didn't have the balls to tell them they were dealing with some kind of mutated sub-human species?

The deafening silence was interrupted by the sound of a twig snapping, perhaps under the pale foot of one of those beings. Sean prepared himself for the next shrill scream, or worse, another one of those *things* to rush at them from behind the veil of darkness. If he weren't clutching his weapon so tightly, he was positive his hands would be shaking uncontrollably.

Turk remained motionless. His eyes were closed, his head tilted back. An attempt to tune himself to the environment, Sean presumed. He figured that after two years in a muddy hole, nothing would be entirely frightening anymore. No situation too dangerous. Death would pass by with a wink and a smile, knowing it had been bested once already.

"Anyone else smelling that?" Turk said, his voice low so as not to be heard too far from their position.

"That's the way it... he smelled," Sean said. "It looked, I don't know, rotten, and covered in shit."

"Got the shit part right," Turk said.

They remained in the same spot for another five minutes. There were no more screams, no twigs snapping. The smell faded, or perhaps they had become used to it.

"Let's get outta here," Turk said. "Ryder, you cover the back. I'll be point. You two watch the side. Move slow and then haul ass on my command."

Sean had been too preoccupied with the situation to check his watch before they left camp. He wasn't sure how long it took them to reach the spot of the attack, but he

estimated their return at less than eight minutes. They walked slowly at first, every step a deliberate attempt to not be noticed and to notice anything that might be watching them. After a couple hundred yards, they increased their pace to a run.

When they reached the camp, Sean found Jules sitting alone. He dropped his gear and sat down next to his partner.

"How'd it go?" Jules asked. "What'd they do with the body?"

Sean contemplated his answer for a minute. Lying would be the best option if he were partnered with any other PJ. But he couldn't lie to Jules, the man would see right through him. He had to be straight with the man.

"Body was gone," Sean replied.

Jules turned his head and swallowed hard. "What d'ya mean? Missing?"

Sean hiked his shoulders an inch, shook his head. "It was gone, man. Shells on the ground. Pool of blood where it collapsed. There was a trail of blood that led into the brush where it had come out from."

"You think it got back up?"

"Nah," Sean said. "You saw its head. It looked like the body was dragged away."

"There's more." A statement, not a question.

Sean nodded. "Heard one of those howls from inside the brush. Close. Then another one from the opposite side, but further away. If you asked me, I'd say it was two more of them, and they were communicating." He placed his palm on the ground and kicked his legs out from under himself. "And the smell, man. That rotten, shit-stained smell was still there."

"What'd Turk say?" Jules turned his head slightly and looked at Sean out of the corner of his left eye, presumably in an attempt to gauge Sean's reaction to the question.

Sean didn't hesitate with his response. "I think he thinks I'm full of it. But he sure as hell was cautious when we started back."

Jules nodded and said nothing.

"Wish we'd found that body. Maybe we'd be getting out of here if we had."

"You think that's why we're out here? Those *things*?"

"I don't know, man. I don't know." Sean hopped up. "Why don't you get some sleep, Jules? I'll watch out for a while then we'll switch."

"They'll have someone watching." Jules lifted his chin and nodded toward the SEALs.

"They'll be watching their own asses if those *things* show up here. We gotta watch our own."

## Chapter 3

Turk lay on the packed ground with nothing but a dull green sheet between him and the dirt. He interlaced his fingers behind his head and crossed his feet at the ankles. A hill jutted up from the ground a half-mile away, silhouetted by the rising moon, which was wide and oval and red. Turk watched the moon rise above the hill and ascend into the sky, turning small and circular and white. In less than ten minutes the orb shrunk to a tenth of the size it had been when he first saw it.

It was bright enough that Turk didn't need to use his flashlight to see the bodies that lay on the ground around the campsite. He easily spotted the dark outlines of his two men that were on patrol. They circled the site, keeping watch for whatever was out there. The moon also provided enough light that he was able to make out the shapes of shrubs dotting the hillside. He couldn't see them with any detail. He was too far away and it was too dark for that. But, he could tell they were there.

However, when one of the shrubs started moving toward the ridgeline, Turk became nervous. He got up and grabbed his SIG and his MP7. He held the former in his hand and strapped the latter across his chest. He reached into his bag and grabbed his night vision goggles and placed them on top of his head. Creating as little sound as possible, he crept in between and around his men, trying not to disturb them.

Ruiz turned to face Turk as he approached the outer perimeter of camp.

"What's up, T?" Ruiz said.

"Going to check something out. Nothing to be alarmed about. I'm not going far, and I'll radio in if something's wrong."

"You got it, Chief," Ruiz said, turning away and returning to his duties.

Almost twenty years in and Turk was rate capped at Chief. He'd never be a Senior Chief, or a Master Chief. Although, there were some who told him he was asshole enough to be either. But if Turk wanted to advance any further, he'd have to change rates. Hell with that, Turk thought.

Twenty yards away from camp, he donned his night vision goggles and began to scan the landscape. It was then that he realized the hillside had no shrubs on it. They were people, and they were on the move. Their movements carried them away from the campsite, so for now, Turk intended only to watch them. He crouched low and scanned the hillside. There were at least two dozen of them and they all walked up the hill, at an angle, to their left. Their gait was odd, and they seemed to move slowly. Turk thought it appeared as though some of them were dragging a leg, or maybe had trouble lifting both feet off the ground.

Turk worked his eyes up and down the hill in a zigzag pattern, ensuring he didn't miss a straggler. The people stopped walking once they reached the hilltop. They didn't bunch up tightly, but they did form a gathering. Their heads dropped back. They seemed to be looking up at the moon. Through the night vision goggles, they looked pale, and their eyes either dark as coal or completely translucent.

Turk had to remind himself to keep his eyes moving and not remain focused on the group at the top of the hill. He scanned the hillside and saw no more bodies moving. He returned his gaze to the group, then looked to the right of them. Another group had



gathered at the far end of the hilltop, and had begun moving toward the people in the middle. Turk then looked toward the left side of the hill. There he saw dozens of them lined up in single file, moving slowly toward the middle of the hill.

*What were they doing?*

They didn't appear to be armed, although Turk couldn't be sure without seeing them up close. They could have side arms hidden underneath their clothes. Turk realized that their clothes were odd. It didn't matter whether they took the form of a man or a woman, they all appeared to be wearing gowns. Not robes, like you might see in certain areas of this continent. They were dressed in gowns that Turk could only compare to hospital gowns.

Turk wanted to get a better look. He had to determine the real reason for SEAL Team 8 being in Nigeria that night. He thought it over for a minute, decided to ascend the hill. He stayed low and moved slow. He didn't climb straight up, instead he used a left-to-right pattern, choosing to head more toward the left each pass so that he would come up a hundred yards or so away from the group. Since they appeared to not be carrying rifles, that would be far enough away that their aim with handguns would be somewhat compromised.

The entire time he climbed, Turk kept his eyes on the group, whether he was moving toward them or away from them. As the walkers met with the group in the middle, their heads inevitably turned upward to stare at the moon. Turk stopped to get another look at the sight. It appeared that they did not blink. They stood, stock still, staring up at a big hunk of glowing space rock. The spectacle struck Turk as odd. He decided to continue moving upward to get a better look.

He didn't take two steps before people on the outer edge of the formation atop the hill began turning around. Turk froze in place, held his breath. He watched the men and women shuffle in a semi-circle, facing his direction. He exhaled slow and low, then crouched when they continued turning around. Fifteen seconds later, they all faced the opposite direction and began traversing down the hill. Turk waited half a minute, then began moving, this time taking a line straight to the ridge. He had no idea what was on the other side, and didn't want to lose sight of the crowd of people.

It took a few minutes for Turk to reach the top. When he did, he lowered himself to his stomach and crawled the few remaining feet to the ridgeline. As he poked his head over, he saw that the hillside was barren. The people had already reached the bottom of the hill and now walked away from Turk and into a valley. A dozen or so split off to the left and slipped into a growth of bushes. There were a few stragglers that appeared to drop to their knees and lean over something placed on the ground. Turk couldn't make out what, though. It appeared to be another shape on the landscape. Eventually, the people rose and joined the others in the bushes.

The rest of the people converged on a central spot directly below Turk. As the group appeared to thin out, Turk realized that, one by one, they disappeared into a black hole, an entrance.

*To what, though?*

Turk wasn't sure, but he felt certain that whatever or wherever the hole led to, it was the reason he, his men, and the two PJs were in Nigeria.

The last person slipped into the hole, and the landscape below him became still. In fact, he felt it was too still. There was no sound at all, no rodents or insects or birds.

Turk began to slide backward in preparation to return to camp when he saw four more bodies approaching from the left. He flattened his body, held his breath. He

worked his hands underneath his chest to grip his MP7 in case the group noticed him.

They didn't though. They walked right past him, then, in the same spot as all the others, descended the hill. Turk decided not to resume position atop the hill to investigate the smaller group any further.

He made his way back to camp and managed to get an hour of sleep.

## Chapter 4

Sean awoke to someone kicking the bottom of his boots. He squinted his eyes open and instinctively brought his hand to his face to shield himself from the bright sun that crested over the distant hills. His other hand went for his side arm.

"Easy there, Ryder," Turk said.

Sean blinked away the sleep and adjusted his head so that Turk's body stood between himself and the sun. Sean propped himself up on his elbows and looked around the camp. He and Turk were the only ones who appeared to be awake.

"Time is it?" Sean asked.

"After six," Turk replied.

Sean shook his head. He'd lain down at two a.m. Jules should have woken him at four, but apparently his partner hadn't managed to remain awake through his shift, leaving them vulnerable for at least the last two hours.

"Come on," Turk said. "Me and you need to take a walk."

Sean picked himself up off the ground and stretched out the kinks. He followed Turk away from the camp, casting a look down at his partner, who was sleeping while leaning back against their packs. During Sean's shift, the night had been silent. No howls. No movement. Nothing at all, in fact, and that concerned him. It made him wary that whatever those *things* were, they were close by, and every living creature made sure to get as far away from them as possible. He couldn't help but think that's what they should do, as well.

He caught up to Turk and said, "Why isn't anybody else up?"

"Some are," Turk said without looking back. "They're waiting. Conserving energy."

Sean thought about asking what for, but didn't. Instead, he said, "Where're we going? Back to last night's location?"

Turk turned his head a notch or two, and looked at Sean out of the corner of his eye. "Nothing to see there." Then he picked up his pace and pulled a few feet ahead. Was that a hint that Sean should shut his mouth?

Sean kept a few feet of distance between himself and Turk as they ascended a dirt-packed hill that rose two hundred feet or so into the air. Sean kept looking back over his shoulder every thirty seconds to get a wider view of the terrain below them. He located the path he and Jules had taken to reach the SEAL team the night before. He wasn't sure, but he thought he might have seen the spot where the attack occurred. Thick vegetation walled both sides of the area. It made sense that those *things* would hide in there. Not that anything about them made sense to Sean.

Turk stopped a few feet shy of the smooth hill crest and turned to face Sean. He said, "All right, here's the deal."

Sean crossed the distance between them and stopped. He faced Turk and mirrored his stance and said nothing.

"Delta Force came through here a week ago. They communicated that they had run into forces of," he paused and wiped the sweat from his brow, leaving a discernible line across the bottom of his forehead like a squeegee on a windshield, "humanoid beings. Apparently, that's the exact phrase they used. They located an underground facility, scouted it. They saw no one enter or exit, but continued to run into these,

*things*. One or two at a time. They lost nobody on their team, and managed to take out everyone they encountered.” He stopped and gave Sean a slight nod, as if asking if he were following along.

“Okay,” Sean said. “Guess that means I’m not crazy.”

“No,” Turk said. “I thought so last night, though. I received this information less than an hour ago.”

“So why are you telling me and not your guys?”

“I’m getting to that.”

“Okay.”

“Can I continue?”

Sean extended his hand. “Go ahead.”

“They lay in wait for about four days, again, Delta, watching. They see a truck pull up to the entrance and block it. A couple guys get out. They look like they are armed to the teeth and wearing body armor. At least, that’s the impression the Delta guys relayed after viewing the men for a couple seconds. They disappear behind the truck, then the truck drives off and the men are no longer in sight. Gone inside, supposedly. The order comes from above that Delta is to infiltrate the place.”

“Why?” Sean asked.

Turk shrugged, brought his hand up and scratched the stubble along his jawline. “I wasn’t given that information. I was told that Delta had to wait for the Rangers to arrive. They were being sent in to provide backup and security.”

Sean felt a lump rise in his throat. “Battalion?”

“Third,” Turk said.

“Company?”

“Bravo.”

Sean exhaled. He knew that they wouldn’t be in Nigeria right now if members of Delta Force and Bravo Company of the Third Battalion of the U.S. Army Rangers didn’t need to be rescued or recovered.

He felt relieved, too.

Sean’s brother, Nick, was a Ranger.

Third Battalion.

Alpha Company.

“Don’t worry,” Turk said. “If it was your brother’s Company, you wouldn’t be here.”

Sean lifted a curious eyebrow. He was not aware that Turk knew about his brother. “Okay, so what’s the deal then? Some of them were killed? Guys hurt? Taken? Are we in rescue or recovery mode?”

Turk shrugged and shook his head as he lowered his eyes toward the ground. “We don’t know, Ryder. Delta went in, and the Rangers didn’t hear anything. They went in, and no one has heard from any of them since. It’s been ninety-six hours of total silence.”

Sean felt a cold bead of sweat drip down his back and settle into the waistband of his pants. Shivers branched out along its path, tracing his nerves. He grabbed his canteen, took a sip of water. “Why are you telling me this?”

Turk looked up and made eye contact with Sean. “Well, you and Jules are here because of potential trauma to the victims, maybe even to my team. I brought you up here because you encountered one of those *things*. We all heard them, as much as we don’t want to admit it. But you saw one. Jules did, too, but he seems worthless

now. What on earth could scare a man like him that much? How did that thing move? How did it react? Eleven shots, man. Did all of them hit?"

Sean nodded. "Every bullet hit. The first three dead center. He... it stumbled for a second, but kept moving. Hell, he moved faster than I've ever seen a man move, and that was after I shot him."

Turk massaged his temples and nodded, presumably taking in the information.

"It wasn't until Jules got a head shot that it, the guy, went down," Sean said. "Look, Turk, I saw the body both alive and dead. I can tell you one thing for certain. It might have looked human, but it had no soul."

Turk turned away, leaned his head back. It looked like he was surveying the short distance from where the two men stood to the top of the hill.

Sean followed the man's gaze and made his own assessment of the area. He knew if there was a secret underground facility, they'd have monitoring or security devices spread across the area. Or were those beings the only security the facility needed? Then a thought crossed Sean's mind that scared him to his core. What if the underground facility was full of an army of those *things*? What if they bred or created them there?

He saw the look on Turk's face and felt certain that the SEAL team leader had the same thoughts.

"Okay," Turk said. "Nice and easy to the top. The entrance is in the ground, past the hill. I want to scout the area and get everyone ready to move."

"You going to tell them what you told me?" Sean asked.

Turk shook his head. "Just the basics. I don't know if they could handle the rest. Shit, I don't know if I can handle it." He took a deep breath, blew the air out in a long stream. "I'm going to tell them about Delta and the Rangers and that we think some are dead and some are being held hostage. We're going to operate on the presumption that this is a rescue mission, but I'll prepare them that they need to be ready for a battle."

Sean nodded and said nothing in reply.

"Okay," Turk said. "Let's get to the top."

Both men crouched as they neared the crest of the hill, dropped to their knees, flattened onto their stomachs. Sean pulled out a scope and surveyed the land beyond the hill. He scanned inch by inch, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He tried to find signs of survivors or the bodies of the dead. However, all he saw was scorched brown earth and thick inhospitable shrubs.

"I got it," Turk said as he extended a muscular arm and pointed with his index finger. "Over there."

Sean moved the scope to the side and followed an imaginary line extending from Turk's finger. He saw a spot on the ground where the dirt didn't match its surroundings. It was loose and browner than the rest, like it had been turned over recently.

"See it?" Turk asked.

"Yeah," Sean replied. "I see it." He brought the scope to his eye and studied the area surrounding the hidden entrance. Nothing seemed out of place. If there were any security measures taken, he couldn't spot them from the top of the hill. He knew they'd have to be careful when they approached. Setting off an IED would not only be deadly for the team, it would also alert whoever was below ground to their presence.

"We're gonna wait here for a little bit," Turk said. "I want to see if anyone, or anything, comes or goes."

"Okay," Sean said against his better judgment. He didn't want to stay there, on top of the hill. What if those *things* were watching them from behind? He didn't think he was in a position to argue with Turk over how they should handle the mission, though. He remained flat on his stomach, studying every square foot of land between himself and the hidden entrance to the underground facility. He scanned the area to the left and to the right, a hundred feet in either direction. Sean wanted to make sure that he could navigate the area with his eyes closed if necessary.

"It's opening," Turk said.

The words took a moment to filter through Sean's brain. He'd been studying a spot where the dirt appeared to be disturbed. The mound of soil was much too large to be the location of an IED, though. It appeared to be about six feet long and two feet wide. A grave, he presumed. There were a couple dozen of them scattered throughout that section of the landscape.

"Ryder," Turk said. "Look."

Sean let his eyes float back to their natural position and then inched his head to the right until his gaze settled on the dirt-covered entrance, which was now propped open a few feet. A pale hand reached out and wrapped around the edge of the door. A matching hand poked out and flattened onto the dirt. Sean moved his scope into position to get a better look. Matted and tangled brown hair appeared next, semi-parted in the middle and hanging over the face of the person exiting the facility. A female form emerged, clothed only in a tattered gown that had probably been white at one time, but now was stained dark red and brown. Sean didn't want to acknowledge the possible causes of the stains.

"Sweet fuzzy ducks, what are we looking at?" Turk said.

Sean squinted, as if the action might provide him with a better view. The woman started walking in their direction. She shook her head side to side, the motion jerky, then she reached up and pulled her hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ears. Sean gasped at the sight of her face. Her eyes were bright and golden brown. Her skin was pale, with dark purple rings surrounding her lips and eyes. She had a gash on her left cheek that gaped open an inch. Faint traces of dark red smeared the area between the cut and her chin, but the wound had stopped bleeding some time ago. The edges of her severed skin were black, appeared to be infected.

"What in God's name are we looking at?" Turk said.

"I don't know," Sean said. "Like I said, they aren't human."

The woman kept shuffling in their direction, stopped. Her eyes closed, revealing purple eyelids. Her head dropped back. She rotated her head to the left, then the right. Her nostrils flared open. She appeared to be trying to sense if something, or someone, was nearby.

"What is—"

Sean jabbed his hand into Turk's side and let out a quick shushing sound. He didn't say anything. If that female thing heard them and started toward them, they'd be forced to kill it. Sean wanted to see what she would do, hoping it would give them an idea how to detect and possibly avoid unnecessary encounters.

The woman's head returned to its natural position, and she opened her eyes. They seemed even brighter, and without looking back, Sean figured that a cloud had slid

past the sun, letting its rays hit the woman in her face. She turned to her right and shuffled toward the mounds of dirt Sean had noticed earlier.

"I thought you said they were fast," Turk whispered.

"They are," Sean said. "I guess only when they want to be, or need to be."

"Come on. Let's get back to camp and get everyone ready to move."

Sean continued to follow the woman with his scope. "Wait. I want to see what she does."

"What?" Turk said.

"Serious. This might help us later."

"Five more minutes. Got it?"

Sean nodded and then returned to watching the woman. At the first grave she came to, she bent over and grabbed a fistful of dirt. Her hand lifted the dirt from the ground to her face. She brought her other hand up and held the loosened earth in both hands. Tiny rivers of brown fell from the cracks between her fingers and cascaded to the ground. She placed her nose in the center of her palms. Sean heard her moans carried on the wind, and then the woman let her hands slip apart and watched the dirt as it fell back on top of the grave. She repeated the process again at a second grave, then moved on to a third. This time, when she brought the dirt to her face and stuck her nose in it, her body straightened and became rigid. Her arms lifted and the soil fell from her hands. Some of it was swept away with the wind, while the remainder of it fell across her hair and shoulders. Then the woman let out a piercing scream before falling to her knees and letting her torso cover the mound that Sean presumed held the body of someone she loved.

## Chapter 5

The team moved out as the final rays of the sun were swallowed up behind the horizon, casting long shadows across the camp. Anything the men didn't carry with them had been buried two feet in the ground. The packed soil hadn't been easy to dig up, but Turk had said he felt better if all traces of them being there were removed. Sean didn't have anything left over, but he pitched in and helped the other men who did.

Turk had given the team a watered down version of the events. He had said that they were there to rescue members of Delta Force and Bravo Company of the U.S. Army Rangers Third Battalion. He didn't give his men false hope that they'd find all of the men alive, though the mission was still classified as rescue and not recovery. He warned all of them to be prepared to face extreme danger once they breached the entrance of the facility.

Turk appeared to deviate from the tactics that Sean expected. He kept all the men close. They didn't question him, although the looks in their eyes appeared to cast doubt on how he was leading them. Sean wondered if he was reading them wrong because he knew something they didn't.

Jules and Sean stayed toward the back of the group as they climbed the hill. Every few seconds, Sean found himself looking over his shoulders to see if something was following them. He no longer believed he'd see a person following the group. Those beings were not human. Not anymore, at least.

They stopped at the top of the hill and everyone dropped to the ground. Each SEAL had an assignment at that point, and they carried out their duties.

Sean immediately turned his attention to the graveyard. He wondered how long the woman had stayed out there. Had she truly been grieving, or were her actions some primal instinct that was carried out because of a series of electrical pulses from the deepest recesses of her brain?

"Shit," Turk said from Sean's right.

Sean adjusted his head and looked toward the hidden entrance to the facility and saw two armed men crouching near it. They appeared to be human, although Sean wasn't sure he could be positive about that.

Turk whistled and Ruiz and Gilmore crawled forward. They each set up their RAD M91A2 sniper rifles and settled themselves in preparation of the shot.

*One shot, one kill*, thought Sean. Though technically the slogan of Marine Scout Snipers, he found it to be appropriate for the current situation. He watched the men who guarded the dirt covered entrance. The only parts of their bodies that moved were their eyes. Sean wondered if perhaps the men had taken notice of the group and had sent a silent alert into the facility, preparing another dozen or so armed guards in anticipation of the team's next move.

Turk gave the signal to Ruiz and Gilmore, and the two men fired in unison, each sending a single .300 Winchester Magnum .30 caliber bullet toward the heads of the unsuspecting men that guarded the entrance.

Sean held his breath as he watched the heads of the men flinch upon impact. A dark hole in each man's forehead signaled the entry wound. Blood trickled, then



flowed freely. Although he couldn't see the exit wounds, he assumed the bullets did their job and destroyed most of the gray matter inside their heads, as well as the backs of their skulls. He knew if he were closer and had the proper lighting, he'd see a pink cloud consisting mostly of blood, but also brain and skull, falling to the ground.

All fourteen men waited in silence. Sean presumed that Turk wanted to wait and see if the guards were being monitored by forces inside the facility. If so, they'd come out through the entrance, the perfect bottleneck, within the next minute or two. Or perhaps they'd unleash some other kind of attack. Sean didn't want to think about that, though. He continued with the belief that if someone was going to come and retaliate, they'd be human and a single bullet to the chest would stop them.

The final twinges of pinkish-red sky faded behind the horizon. Sean switched to his night vision goggles. He tried to remain focused on the entrance, but his sights kept drifting toward the graveyard. Perhaps it was simply human nature, a need to fill in the blanks and have all questions answered, but he couldn't stop wondering what was buried under the dirt mounds. Had those *things* buried the man Jules had killed the night before, perhaps alongside the bodies of the creatures Delta had killed? Or were the bodies that lay there those of humans who perished at the hands of the beings?

Sean saw the outline of a hunched-over figure moving at a slow pace between two rows of loose dirt. Even from this distance, the eyes stood out against the rest of the body. Sean was sure that if he could see the thing up close and without night vision goggles on, those eyes would glow brown or green or blue, even in the dark. The figure stopped next to one of the gravesites. Sean waited to see if it would lean over, presumably to scoop up dirt and sniff it, possibly in an attempt to find a loved one. But the being didn't bend, nor did it reach into the dirt. Instead, it straightened and dropped its head back. He remembered how the woman had done the same thing earlier that day, her eyes closed and nostrils flared wide. At that moment, he also became aware of a light wind blowing against the back of his sweaty neck. The breeze that cooled him would also carry their scent in the direction of the graveyard, and that thing.

Sean scooted back until he was below the ridgeline. "Turk," he whispered.

Turk looked over his shoulder, crawled backward until he was next to Sean.

"What?" Turk said.

Sean took a breath and then said, "There's one in the graveyard. I think it knows we're here."

"Why?"

"It changed posture, like the woman, or thing, earlier today. I get the feeling they do that to, I don't know, maybe sense what's around."

Turk nodded, said nothing.

"And the wind is blowing in that direction. It's carrying our scent right to it."

Turk reached up and rubbed his eyes, leaving smudges of dirt on his cheeks.

"Okay." He shifted into a crouching position and approached Gilmore. "Gilly," he said.

"Scan the area to your left. It might look like a graveyard, mounds of dirt on the ground and shit. You see anything alive in there, shoot it."

Gilmore nodded, adjusted his rifle and his position so he could scout the graveyard.

"Make it a head shot," Turk added.

Sean resumed his position at the top of the hill and relocated the being. It was moving, shuffling in their direction. Its right foot would step forward, then its left would drag along the ground, foot cockeyed, until both legs were even. Sean wondered if the

man they encountered the night before moved this way when walking. Perhaps these *things* walked slowly when they didn't have a purpose. Only when their intent was to hurt or kill, or maybe even feed, did they move fast.

The thing stopped again, now about halfway between the men and the graveyard. The distance was deceiving, though. The last third would be uphill, and with as slow as it walked, that would take a while. Even if it sprinted toward their position, the uphill climb was certain to slow it down.

"Gilly, what's taking so long?" Turk said, a little too loud, mirroring Sean's thoughts exactly.

"Frickin' trying to line up this shot," Gilmore said. "His head... the damn thing moves in my scope."

"What do you mean it moves?" Turk said. "I'm watching it. It's still as a damn rock."

"Moves isn't the right word," Gilmore said. "It shimmers."

Turk cursed and rose up a foot or two to pass over the four men between him and Gilmore. He dropped to his stomach, and Sean felt a puff of wind and a thin layer of dirt coat his face.

"Let me see your rifle," Turk said.

Gilmore shifted to his right and Turk maneuvered himself behind the weapon. He placed his eye to the scope. "Where the frig is it?"

A sliver of panic passed through Sean. He swung his head to the left and scanned the area below them. The thing had disappeared.

"I don't see it," Sean said.

At that moment, a shrill shriek erupted from no more than twenty feet from them. As soon as the sound had passed, the thing hovered over Gilmore and flipped him over and then swiped at the SEAL's neck. Gilmore's screams were drowned in the blood that spewed forth from the gaping hole in his throat.

Turk was the first to react. He rose to his knees and swung the M91A2 around. Three bullets remained in the magazine. He fired all three in rapid succession. The first hit the thing in the abdomen, only causing a slight reaction in the form of a grunt. The next two shots were perfect, one smashing into the center of its forehead, and the other on the right side, an inch above the ear.

Sean watched as its body folded over and fell to the ground in a heap, still and silent.

"Ryder, Jules," Turk said, slowly and deeply. "Help Gilly."

Sean remained frozen for a minute as he processed what had happened. He had to compartmentalize it and focus on helping Gilmore. That's what he and Jules were there for. The SEALs had medical training, but PJs were the most prepared to deal with combat injuries, especially life-threatening wounds. He grabbed Jules by the collar and both men rushed to Gilmore's body, each taking a side. They pulled him down the hillside a few feet so that the tops of their heads weren't exposed over the hill crest.

"Need light," Sean said.

Someone shone a light over his shoulder, aiming the strong beam at Gilmore's head. The light reflected off of the man's dull and lifeless eyes. The grievous wound had severed both carotid arteries, and what little blood pressure remained pumped out what was left of his blood. Sean knew at that moment there was no point in attempting resuscitation, but he and Jules did everything they could. Kneeling in a

pool of a mixture of Gilmore's and the being's blood, Sean applied pressure to the dead man's neck.

The team was quiet. There were no words of encouragement. Every man could tell Gilmore was gone by the amount of blood on the ground and the size of the hole in his neck.

"Stop," Turk said.

Sean rocked back on his heels and looked down at his soaked crimson-colored hands. He felt drops of fluid falling from his fingers and splattering on his pants.

The sounds of nature had disappeared. There were no chirping birds. The ever-present hum of insects could no longer be heard.

The men looked at one another then crept up to the hilltop.

Sean saw the outlines of five or six beings at the foot of the hill. The quiet night was soon full of their howls and shrieks as they ascended the hill toward the team. Or perhaps toward the body in an attempt to recover it. A hail of gunfire erupted around Sean. He noticed Jules collapse onto his back and worried for a second that his partner had been hit, or attacked by one of those *things*. Jules reached down and grabbed his pistol from his thigh holster, then rolled over and began firing. Sean did the same.

After a minute of incessant gunfire, the air smelled of cordite and the area was still and quiet again, save for the high-pitched hum in Sean's ears. He scanned the area below them and saw bodies scattered across the hillside. None of the bodies moved, and none appeared to be breathing. Instinctively, he looked toward the graveyard to see if any more were approaching. His gut told him that's where the ones they'd gunned down came from, even if he only recalled seeing one. Relief flooded his system when he saw that the area between them and the graveyard and the entrance to the facility was empty. He wasn't sure if it was misplaced or not, but at that moment he felt that they'd be safer inside.

Turk started down the hill, and without a word spoken, his team followed. Everyone moved with a sense of urgency, masking the pain they all felt at the loss of Gilmore.

"We better go," Sean said to Jules, who nodded in response.

They descended the hill, wasting no time crossing the remaining distance to the entrance. Turk headed to the right and inspected the body of one of the deceased guards. He shone a light over the man and dug through his pockets, producing a bundle that appeared to hold an ID card.

"Christ," Turk said. "I don't think these were guards."

"Why's that?" Sean said.

"This badge indicates he's part of a NATO force." Turk looked back at his men. "Someone check the other guy."

Bates returned a moment later with an ID card and said, "Same with this guy."

"What were they doing then?" Sean said.

Turk shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe these are fake? To get them in and out of the area?"

"Maybe you should call it in?" Sean said.

"Nah," Turk said. "Not right now. Let's get inside."

Two men worked on the entrance door while the rest took position and watched over the area. At this point, they knew they had to be ready for an attack originating from anywhere. The beings were capable of getting there in the blink of an eye, so they had to be spotted and dealt with at once.

Turk and Sean slipped through the opening first. They hunched and squatted down in an effort to move through a tunnel that angled downward. The faint glow of light could be seen, and it looked like the tunnel curved before it reached the source of the illumination. It took the two men about a minute to reach the other end of the shaft.

Despite everything that had happened in the previous twenty-four hours, Sean found himself unprepared for what he saw as he crouched down and stuck his legs out of the tunnel, lowering them to the floor. He ducked his head, clearing the overhang, and then straightened his body. Fluorescent light fixtures cast a dim yellow glow over the area. There were trails of blood on the ground. The fluid was of varying shades of red and different textures, indicating how fresh or old it was. Some spots were considerably darker than others, and Sean realized those spots didn't contain blood, but rather human feces scraped along the ground as if dragged by feet that didn't, or perhaps couldn't, break contact with the floor. Bloody handprints lined the walls from floor to ceiling. In some spots, thick rivers of crimson flowed from the prints on the wall to the floor. There were deep scratches etched into the wall and he found himself imagining some deranged being clawing at the walls with bloody stumps where fingernails had once been.

"What the holy hell happened here?" Turk said from behind Sean.

Sean shook his head. He found no words to describe what he felt. His eyes continued to scan the hallway. He saw offices with busted windows. Lights flickered throughout the hall and in the rooms.

Finally, the entire team filled the small area of the lobby. Everyone remained silent and stood in place, presumably contemplating what had happened to create the macabre scene they stood before. The place was quiet. Good, in a way, because it helped Sean feel that danger was not imminent. On the other hand, he had the distinct feeling that something was watching them, and if the team didn't make the correct move, it would pounce without warning.

"All right," Turk said as he pushed to the front of the group. "We need to find a secure location for command. Let's get moving."

## Chapter 6

The sound of the group moving through the hall echoed inside Sean's head. He knew he heard it because his training had attuned him to listening for such things. Reality was that they moved down the hall as a silent amoeba, shifting as the group changed shape when necessary. Sean and Jules were in the middle of the group, shielded by SEALs on all sides.

The buzz from the light fixtures above them rose and fell as they passed underneath them. Every so often, a light appeared to be on the fritz, flickering between low and high illumination like a strobe light, or cutting off entirely.

They came to a corner office set against an intersecting hallway. Sean craned his head to check the darkened corridor. To his left, the hall dead ended after ten feet. To the right, it extended further than he could see because of the darkness. The lights had either burned out, or been smashed out. He didn't think either option was out of the realm of possibility.

He slipped between the men next to him and stepped into the open doorway of the empty office. The windows surrounding the room on both sides had been broken. Jagged shards of glass remained attached to the frame, while tinier fragments littered the floor. The wooden door was split down the middle, and only attached to one set of hinges. If Sean touched it, he was sure it would sway like a pendulum, scraping along the floor. A monitor lay face down on the desk. He saw a keyboard upside down on the floor, several of its keys scattered throughout the office. He noticed a small puddle of blood on the corner of the desk and the floor below it. Upon further inspection, he saw a clump of hair and bloodied scalp attached to the sharp corner.

It was the fifth office they had passed, but Turk hadn't shown any intention of stopping to investigate. Why? Did he know more than he had let on? He had given Sean plenty of information, but there were pieces of the story missing. Things that didn't make sense, perhaps because they couldn't make sense.

Sean left the office and quickly and silently resumed his position within the group. The man next to him shook his head and shot him a look. But Sean didn't care. They were in unfamiliar territory, and he justified his actions as being potentially helpful later on if he found himself roaming these halls while struggling to survive. There was no field manual for what they had seen, or for what he feared they would encounter in the pits of the facility.

Turk lifted a fist into the air and stopped. He hunched over and moved to his left, then stuck his head inside an office through a hole in a smashed window. He pulled out of the hole and made eye contact with Sean.

"Come on," he said.

Sean pushed past the men next to him again and met Turk near the office door. Turk had his hand on the knob and began turning it.

"What is it?" Sean said.

Turk shook his head, then leaned his shoulder into the door and pushed it open. They were greeted with the foul smell of a decomposing body. In the hall, the smell of the corpse had mixed with blood and feces and ammonia, and had gone unnoticed.

Except, it seemed, by Turk. However, inside the office, the stench was enough to cause Sean's stomach to turn.

"Where's the body?" Sean said, looking over Turk's shoulders in an attempt to get a better look around.

Turk reached out and spun an office chair. The black leather chair swung to the right and came to a stop dead center in front of the two men. A faceless figure slumped in the seat. Its hands were missing. So were its legs below the knees. Dark blood caked the jagged ends where extremities had once protruded.

"What the frig?" Sean said as he backed up until he hit the wall.

Turk took a step forward, leaned over, placed his hands on his knees, appeared to be investigating the remains of the man's face. Turk's head dropped to the left, then the right, then he straightened his body and turned at the waist, making eye contact with Sean.

"Bite marks," Turk said.

"What?" Sean said.

"Someone chewed his face off."

Sean steeled himself and took four steps forward. He stopped next to Turk and leaned over, placing his left hand on his knee and keeping the other on his Beretta M9 semiautomatic 9mm pistol. He held his breath as he placed his face closer to the remains of whoever had once occupied the seat. The nose was missing, and so were the eyes. All that was left were hollow sockets that had been gouged bare. The flesh around the cheeks had been stripped off in chunks, down to the bone in some spots. It looked like Turk had been correct in his assumption. The edges of the wounds showed the distinct patterns of bite marks. Sean glanced down at the stubby arms and legs and wondered if whoever, or whatever, had done this to the man's face, had also chewed off his extremities.

Sean stood and took a couple steps back. His head felt heavy, drowning under the weight of the discovery. Was this all a dream? Surely, there was no possible way they could have seen any of what they'd seen over the last twenty-four hours.

Gunfire erupted in the distance, and Sean, with his hand still on the handle of his M9, retrieved his pistol and spun toward the sound of the shots.

Turk pushed past Sean and exited the office, resuming his spot at the head of the group. The SEAL team dropped into position, each man covering another and watching an area of the hall. Two men took off toward the sound of the gunfire without being told. They stopped further down the hall, at the edge of the intersection with the dark corridor.

The spattering of bullets, and the echo they produced throughout the hall, ended almost as abruptly as they began.

For the first time that day, Sean felt that their mission might include rescue, and not only recovery. He considered the possibility that one of those *things* had a weapon, but dismissed the thought. His experience so far, as limited as it was, indicated that the beings didn't have the instincts to use weapons. They didn't need them, judging by how easily one had killed Gilmore.

"All right, everybody," Turk said. "We're gonna investigate down there, but not until we've reached the end of the perimeter hallway."

Sean fell back in formation and the group began moving again. He felt as though he moved with a purpose now that there was a possibility of finding someone alive. It didn't matter who it was. He hoped they could get there in time to save them. He

looked to his right to share his enthusiasm with Jules, and saw the man struggling to keep his eyes open.

"You doing all right?" Sean said.

Jules turned his head and nodded. "Yeah. A bit tired and my head hurts. But I'll be OK."

Jules was sweating profusely, but under the circumstances, Sean didn't put too much weight into that. The air in the facility was stagnant. He assumed that the underground building's ventilation system had ceased to operate. He didn't bother to presume as to why, though.

One by one, in rapid succession, the lights in the hall blinked out starting from the far end of the corridor. The buzzing sound they created diminished until it disappeared altogether.

"Dammit," Turk said.

A few seconds later, dull red emergency lights turned on. They were anchored to the wall near the ceiling and surrounded by thick metal cages. Sean wondered if the facility had lost power and the generator was slow to kick on. Or, worse, it had already been running on generator power and the fuel had run out.

"Extra caution," Turk said. "Careful if you have to shoot. Make damn sure it's not one of us you got your sights on."

One man chuckled, but the rest remained quiet. The atmosphere was somber, and with good reason.

A series of howls and shrieks and yells erupted throughout the building. They came at the group from both directions, echoing and bouncing off the walls and the floors and the ceiling. Sean lifted his hands to his ears and twisted at the waist, expecting to see an army of the creatures coming at them from the front and from behind. But there was nothing. Then the calls that roared through the corridor faded to silence. Perhaps the noise was their reaction to the lights going out. Or maybe it was something else.

Celebration?

Maybe the last survivor, the man wielding the gun, had succumbed to the beings.

"Let's go," Turk said from the front of the group.

They continued down the hall, passing office after office. All had been ransacked, not a one of them spared. Sean noticed another body sprawled across a desk, and soon this became the norm, rather than the exception. They weren't the soldiers the men were looking for, though. If Sean had to place them, he'd figure them to be people who had worked in the facility.

The red emergency lights cut off, and after a second or two, the fluorescent hall lights turned back on, although Sean thought they seemed dimmer than before. With the hall illuminated again, he noticed that the corridor came to an end about a hundred feet ahead. It appeared that another lit hallway connected to it. The group slowed down as they approached the end. Turk signaled to Bellows and Steele, and the two men moved ahead of the group. They pressed against the interior wall and made their way to the corner.

Steele led the way. When he reached the corner, he dropped to a knee and Bellows pushed up tight to him. They both peered around the corner together, allowing the barrels of their HK MP7 submachine guns to precede them.

Steele signaled to the group, and Turk began moving. The rest of the men followed without hesitation.

Sean rounded the corner and saw that the walls that lined the hallway were solid. No windows or doors as far as he could see. He figured the outer wall, to his left, butted up to solid rock, or at least packed earth. There appeared to be a recessed section on the interior wall a couple hundred feet ahead on the right. Another hallway, he figured, one that might cut through the center of the facility.

Ten bodies were scattered throughout the hall. They lay on the floor, motionless and with obvious catastrophic injuries.

What was worse was that they were all clothed in ACUs, Army Combat Uniforms.

Sean swallowed hard in an attempt to force the lump in his throat down. He knew that the bodies they saw were those of the Rangers who'd been sent in to provide security and backup for Delta.

"Check each one," Turk said. "But don't linger. From where I'm standing, they don't look alive."

Sean noted the grotesque wounds on their bodies. Some had been killed, leaving the men to look like they were sleeping, except for the mortal wounds to their heads, necks or chests. Others had been mutilated in such a way that he felt like it ruled out a human being responsible for the death. There was no way one man could do that to another.

He and Jules assessed each man as two teams of three SEALs watched over them. The process was quick, and it didn't require more than a glance to pronounce each man dead. All of them, even the ones that weren't mutilated, showed signs of decomposition, leading Sean to believe the deaths occurred more than forty-eight hours ago.

Sean looked up after pronouncing the last body and saw that Turk and the other SEALs had moved ahead and were walking along the exterior wall. They stopped at a spot where he assumed Turk had a view of the open area Sean had noticed when they first started their trek down this section of the facility.

Turk looked back at Sean and the others and signaled for them to approach. The group moved together along the interior wall and came to a stop fifteen feet from Turk.

Turk crossed the hall and said, "I think we've found our command room."

Sean moved closer and saw a twenty-foot expanse of window still intact. It appeared as though it had been impacted, perhaps by bullets, but the glass had not shattered. Bloody handprints were scattered along the glass, but they had not made a dent in it. They wouldn't, Sean figured, just like bullets wouldn't. The glass was impenetrable.

Behind the windows were banks of computers and monitors, some on and others off. There was a single door leading in, and another one against the far wall, but the second door was solid steel, so there was no way to tell what was behind it. It could've been a closet or a door to another office.

Collins and Brady were the first to approach the room. They found the door to be locked. However, with the aid of a specialized set of tools, they managed to open it and take control of their new command room.



## Chapter 7

The SEAL team investigated every nook and cranny of the room. Karl and Metz moved from computer to computer performing a quick check to determine whether or not the machines held information that would have been deemed critical.

Sean and Jules hung back against the rear wall, watching the men work. Judging by the looks on the men's faces, Sean figured they'd all be happy to wait it out in the bulletproof room until additional forces arrived. He knew none of them would admit it, though. Still, he couldn't blame them if they felt that way. It was the way he felt after seeing the condition of the bodies they'd passed in the hall, not to mention the things they had experienced outside.

"I'm never coming back to Nigeria, Jules," Sean said.

Jules nodded and said, "Man, me neither, and this is probably where my ancestors come from."

A quick laugh escaped Sean's mouth, drawing a curious look or two from the SEALs.

"Guess we shouldn't do that again," Sean said.

"What's this we stuff?" Jules said. "You're the one losing control in here."

Sean felt like laughing again. It wasn't that he found anything particularly amusing. He figured it was his mind's way of coping with the situation. How many men, U.S. soldiers and highly trained ones at that, had entered this facility? Fifty? More? How many had exited?

None. A big fat friggin' zero.

In Sean's mind, that meant his chances of ever stepping foot on solid earth again, as well as the chances of Jules and the entire SEAL team doing the same, were slim to none.

Sean noticed that the SEALs were standing around, all except for Karl and Metz who still had four computers to check. Turk stood directly across from Sean, the SEAL team leader's eyes locked on his. Turk held his MK 14 EBR in both hands, across his abdomen, aimed at nothing. An HK MP7 was strapped across Turk's chest, and Sean knew from working with the man that Turk could change weapons faster than most men could unzip their pants.

For two minutes, the men stared at each other. Neither looked away. Neither man blinked. The look in Turk's eyes and on his face was one that Sean was familiar with. It was the look of a brave man who knew that death was certain. He'd seen it in every man he'd been unable to save. That point when a mission went from rescue to recovery. They stared at death and refused to let the reaper believe he had any power over them. The only question Sean had was whether or not that was the look on his own face.

The room was quiet except for the faint hum of the lights, the weak *whirr* of a fan—something that Sean had not noticed in the building until now—and the sounds of Karl and Metz banging on keyboards. Metz stopped and stood and moved toward the final computer. All eyes focused on the man. He took a seat and grabbed a mouse and placed his hands over the keyboard. A minute later, Karl dragged a seat across the aisle. Squeaky wheels in desperate need of oiling broke the silence. Karl picked up

the chair and carried it the final three feet, then placed it on the ground and sat next to Metz.

The two men spoke to one another in hushed tones, too low for Sean to figure out what they were saying. Geek speak, Sean figured. He wouldn't have understood it anyway.

The lights dimmed and flickered. Metz cursed out loud, perhaps worried that he was going to lose power to the computer. And if he was worried about that, it probably meant that he had found something.

Sean pushed off the wall and took a few steps forward. Apparently, Turk had the same thought, because he started moving toward Metz at the same time.

"Turk," Metz said. "I got something we can use."

"What is it?" Turk said as he picked his way through the men. He came to a stop three feet from the team's resident IT specialists and narrowed his eyes as he looked down at the screen. "That what I think it is?"

"Blueprints," Metz said. "The entire facility. Look," he pointed toward the screen, "we're on the first floor. That locked door in the back of the room leads below, but whatever's down there doesn't connect to anything else on the floor below us."

"So this corridor wraps around on all four sides," Turk said, "but stops halfway in the front and doesn't connect with the hall we came in through."

"That's right," Metz said.

"Stairs at the end of the dark hallway we passed," Turk said. "The one we heard gunfire from." He glanced around the room. The rest of the team nodded in agreement with his statement.

"Yeah," Metz said. "And the hall parallel, the one this connects to, has an adjoining half hallway that leads to another set of stairs down. It cuts through the middle of the facility, like the dark hall where we heard the gunshots coming from. They don't meet though."

Sean moved closer to where Turk stood and began making a mental diagram in case he found himself separated from Turk and had to find his way through the building.

"Where's the diagrams for the next floor?" Turk asked.

Metz adjusted the mouse and scrolled. "There."

"All right," Turk said. "It looks like the floor we're on is halls and offices or whatever, but packed earth in the middle. But the floor below this one, there's no gaps. Look, four big rooms in the corners with a wide hall, maybe, between them. Then it looks like the center of the floor is walled, but there's open space and some smaller rooms."

"And there's a third floor," Karl said. "Mirrors the second."

Turk leaned forward and took control of the mouse. "Yeah, except the rooms in the corners are bigger. There's no smaller rooms on that floor. Halls and walls, and those big-ass rooms."

"What do you think they're for?" Sean asked.

Turk looked over his shoulder and stared at Sean for a moment before responding. "I hope that's where the men who came in here before us are being held."

"What if..." Sean stopped mid-sentence. He wanted to ask what if those *things* were being contained down there, but thought better of it.

"Yeah," Turk said. "No *what ifs* on this mission. We need to verify everything."

Sean glanced around the room and took note of the large blank screens hanging on the wall. "What about those?"

"I'd guess those screens were used for monitoring what's going on below," Karl said.

"Why aren't they on?" Turk asked.

"They're either run by one of these computers that's down," Karl replied, "or by another system that's down. This place seems to be working on little power. Why? Your guess is as good as mine."

"Fair enough," Turk said. "You think you can get them running?"

Karl shrugged. "I guess it's possible."

Turk moved to the middle of the room where he could face everyone. "Okay, then. Karl, you stay here with the PJs. The rest of us are—"

"Wait a minute," Sean said. "I'm not staying down here. I'm going with you."

"You're staying here," Turk said.

"What if someone out there needs medical assistance?"

"Then I'll make the determination how severe it is and if we think the guy has a chance, we'll bring him back here and you can provide the necessary medical assistance in here."

"This is bullshit," Sean said.

"What's bullshit is my guys having to watch your ass instead of their own."

Sean felt his face burn. Calling him, or any PJ for that matter, a liability was an insult. "We can handle ourselves, and for damn sure, *you* know that."

"Oh yeah?" Turk said. "You sure about that?" He pointed past Sean.

Sean turned his head and saw Jules leaning back against the wall, eyes closed, forehead covered in sweat.

"Counterpoint?" Turk said.

Sean shook his head. "Whatever. You win. We'll stay here."

Turk moved closer to Sean and placed his hand on Sean's shoulder. He leaned in close, spoke in a hushed tone. "It ain't about me winning and you losing. We're a team. This is now our command room and it's the safest place in the building. If something happens and only one of my guys survives, I need you safe and sound to make sure he gets out alive. This isn't a slight against you or PJs in general. Got it?"

Sean nodded and pulled away from Turk's grasp. "Yeah, I got it."

Turk lifted both hands in the air, but stopped short of placing his hands on Sean's shoulders again. "You and me are cool, Sean. You know that."

Sean said nothing. He looked past Turk and stared out the windows at the empty hallway. His eyes fixed on a dark stain that appeared to have been made when a bloodied head hit the wall and slid down it.

Turk backed up and made his way to the door that led to the corridor. "Let's go."

The SEAL team filed out of the room. Turk was the last to leave. He looked back at Sean and gave him a slight nod, as if to say *hold down the fort until I get back*. The door shut with a thump and a click, and Sean watched Turk walk beyond the bulletproof glass and then disappear from view.

The room was quiet again, except for the sounds of Karl tapping away at a keyboard.

Sean turned to Jules and slapped him across the face. His partner's skin felt cool and was covered in sweat.

Jules opened his eyes and furrowed his brow. "What?"

"I should be asking you that," Sean said. "What's wrong with you?"

Jules slouched back against the wall. "I don't know, man. Feel like I got the flu."

"Well, get your shit together. I got a feeling we're gonna be pretty busy soon." He hoped so, at least. His gut told him that the only thing they'd find in the building was dead bodies.

Jules nodded and said nothing.

Sean inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly. He studied his friend for a moment, then said, "Go sit down and get some rest. I'll get you up when we need you."

He didn't want to send Jules to take a nap, leaving himself as the only one who was watching the door, but he had to weigh the benefits of having Jules up now versus later. If the SEALs did succeed in rescuing survivors, it'd take both of them to assess their injuries and treat those most in need. Guys like Turk and Spencer could help. They had enough years in and had been through plenty of medical training. But Sean knew that there was no guarantee they'd be coming back.

"Uh, Sean," Jules said.

"Yeah?" Sean said.

"Look."

Sean lifted his eyes and looked at his friend. The man stood still, straight for the first time in twenty minutes. His eyes were wide and his mouth open an inch. Sean followed his gaze toward the front of the room. He retrieved his M9 and aimed it beyond the glass at the thing that shuffled down the hall.

"It's one of them," Jules said.

"I know," Sean said as he lowered his weapon, keeping both hands on it, and began moving toward the window. He'd already passed by Karl, but knew that the man was looking at the thing beyond the glass, because his fingers had stopped hammering away at the keyboard for the first time since Turk and the other SEALs had left the room.

"It's gonna get in here," Jules said.

"Shut up, Jules," Sean said. "Calm down."

"What in the world is that?" Karl said, now a step behind Sean.

Sean holstered his pistol as he stopped two feet from the window. He watched the woman on the other side of the window, at least it looked to be a woman, approach from his left. She wore a heavy coat, with a fur-lined hood. The hood sat atop her head and hung over her brow, shading her face. Three things gave her away to Sean as being not quite human. Her pale-white legs poked out from a tattered and dirty gown. Upon further inspection, Sean noted that the skin of her legs was lined with cuts, bruises, and streaks of dried blood. When she walked, she shuffled, managing to lift only her right foot a few inches off the ground. Her blue eyes seemed to glow in the shadows created by her hood.

He felt Karl pressed up against his right shoulder, and he turned to tell him to step back.

The man met his stare and said, "Do you see what I'm s—"

There was a loud bang on the glass and the muffled sound of a high-pitched scream followed. Sean stepped back and swung his head around. The woman, who'd been maybe ten feet away when he turned to look at Karl, now stood right in front of him. Her hood had fallen behind her head, and he saw that half her scalp had been pulled back. It hung down in a bloody sheet next to her neck, the weight of her blond hair pinning it down. Her arms were spread wide and she pounded on the glass repeatedly with the palms of her hands, leaving dirt and blood smudged on the window.

Karl pushed Sean to the side and pulled out his Sig Sauer P226 pistol. He fired two shots into the glass before Sean managed to knock the weapon out of the SEAL's hands.

"What're you gonna do with that, Karl?" Sean yelled.

"I... not sure..."

Sean shook his head and went to the window to inspect the damage. The bullet had hardly made a dent. He had been afraid that Karl's shots would weaken the integrity of the glass and any repeated banging by the woman would eventually cause the window to shatter. The glass held, though, and his fears subsided, for a moment at least.

The woman on the other side of the window had retreated against the far wall at the sound of the gunfire and bullets hitting the window. She was kneeling on the floor, her right arm covering her head. Sean found the behavior peculiar, and he wondered if these creatures were similar to humans in that they had their own quirks and fears and desires.

The woman rose from her crouched position and rushed the glass. Her appearance seemed distorted as she crossed the hall, almost like a blur. He recalled Gilmore saying that the man's head shimmered, up on the hill, moments before that same man killed him.

"She'll move on."

Sean spun around and planted his back against the glass. Karl did the same a few feet away from him. They both held their pistols out and aimed at the figure in the middle of the open doorway in the back of the room.

A small, fragile man with wisps of white hair atop his head and a thick white beard framing his face stepped out from the darkness. He held a pistol in his hand, but appeared to be careful not to aim it at the men.

## Chapter 8

"What was that?" Turk cast a glance over his shoulder and saw that none of his men offered up an explanation in regards to the noise he'd heard. It sounded like a knock on a door, but so far the hallway walls were solid on both sides. No doors, no windows. A shriek followed the sound, but the sounds of people screaming had become commonplace, and he couldn't tell if the yell was related to the knocking. "All right, let's keep moving. Keep your eyes open."

The feeling that they were being followed had been with Turk the entire time they'd been inside the facility. It was something he couldn't shake, which was unusual. Turk was the kind of man who could push anything aside in order to focus on the task at hand.

He'd noticed the cameras when they exited the tunnel that led in from the outside. They were mounted near the ceiling throughout the facility and were protected by plastic bubbles. He figured the cameras were off, since they didn't move, and there weren't any indicator lights blinking. Then again, maybe whoever installed them was smart and placed electrical tape over the lights. It didn't matter, though. Turk was paranoid and he figured it was the presence of the cameras that made him so.

Or perhaps it was the fear that the building was full of those *things*.

The hallway opened up to the right, twenty feet ahead. They were near the center of the facility, close to the stairwell, still on the first floor. Turk stopped, motioned for Bates to step forward. He resumed walking once Bates fell in next to him. The two men moved on, took three steps, stopped to listen. Turk heard nothing other than the faint hum of the fluorescent lights. The sound had been present everywhere they'd been in the building, and it was a little unsettling that he hadn't tuned the noise out.

Turk and Bates stood five feet from the corner that led to the opening he expected would lead them to the stairwell. He stooped over and closed his eyes, hoping that doing so would enhance his other senses. It was a maneuver that had paid dividends in the past. Thirty seconds passed and Turk prepared to open his eyes and resume his approach. Then he noticed a dull thumping sound.

"Hear that?" he whispered to Bates.

"I just hear that damn humming," Bates replied.

"Listen," Turk said. "Close your eyes and listen."

Turk noticed that Bates attempted to steady his breathing. A move, he figured, to help the man better attune himself to the environment.

"Thump, thump, thump," Bates whispered, mimicking the sound that Turk heard over the electrical buzz above them.

Was the thumping getting louder because he was aware of it? Or because it was getting *closer*? He decided if the cause was the latter, he wanted the team in formation and ready to act.

Turk motioned for the rest of the SEALs to join him and Bates. The men moved into position. Together, they approached the corner. Turk squatted and eased himself past the wall. The barrel of his submachine gun left the safety of the concrete barrier. His head followed. The hallway stood empty. He saw steel handrails mounted against the wall on both sides, about waist high. The rails led to the descending stairwell.

"Let's go," he said.

The SEALs moved down the hallway toward the stairwell, each man's movements in time with the man next to or in front of him, as if they'd choreographed it. They were silent killers. A man could have been standing ten feet away, and they wouldn't have heard Turk and his men approaching. Everything went smooth as butter, thought Turk. At least, it did up until the point when Ruiz started coughing.

"Everyone back," Turk ordered.

The team retreated to the far end of the hall, splitting into two groups. One went right, the other left. They faced each other and waited.

"Who did that?" Turk said.

Ruiz stepped forward, his head hanging, eyes cast down at the floor.

"Ruiz?" Turk said. "You alerted anyone down there to our presence. You realize that, right? Or are you the damn FNG now?" Turk brought his right hand to his face and squeezed the bridge of his nose. "You're leading the damn way now, Ruiz."

"Yeah, I got it," Ruiz said.

Turk motioned for the group to get ready as Ruiz stepped past him. He noticed that sweat soaked the man's short spiky black hair and face. He looked over the men nearest to him and saw that they also had sweat on their foreheads. He didn't find the temperature in the facility uncomfortable, but the airflow left a lot to be desired. Plus, nerves were racked, with some men more than others.

Ruiz led the team down the hall toward the stairs. Turk and Bates followed close behind, with the rest of the group in formation behind them. The thumping grew louder the closer they got to the stairwell. The noise rose loud enough that it drowned out the constant buzzing. Turk thought the banging sounded more like a soft thud the closer they got.

They reached the edge of the stairwell and Turk whistled for Ruiz to stop, then he moved up to take position next to the man. There were a dozen stairs that connected to a wide platform. He leaned forward and looked over the inside railing. He saw another set of stairs heading down on the other side of the platform, heading in the opposite direction.

Turk turned and faced his team. "Bates, Schmitt, Spencer," he said. "You three with me. Ruiz, your ass is going first." He looked at the man out of the corner of his eye, but saw no discernible reaction. He wondered if Ruiz was even paying attention to what he was saying. "The rest of you, wait until we clear the platform, then head down. I don't know what's after the next set of stairs, but if it's a wall or a door, we'll all meet there. If it's open, we'll figure it out after twelve more steps."

He turned and nudged Ruiz in the back, sending the man toward the first step. Ruiz hunched over, extending the barrel of his M4 in front of him, began descending the stairs. He took a step, then stopped, presumably to listen. Then he took another step. He stopped twice more before descending the remainder of the stairs to the landing. Despite the speed at which he traveled, he remained silent.

Turk and the three men with him moved without hesitation. They reached the bottom, and the five SEALs leaned against the outer wall. Turk looked over his shoulder at the rest of his team and saw five faces staring back in anticipation. He crouched, approached the other side of the landing. The banging was louder and continued to intensify as he moved past the barrier the stairs had created.

"What am I seeing?" he muttered to himself. He gestured with his head for Ruiz to join him. He wasn't going to send him ahead again, though. Ruiz had served his

punishment for potentially ruining their cover, and Turk wasn't going to place the man in a situation where he could be killed without backup to watch out for him.

Turk stayed low, Ruiz remained high. They moved in unison past the relative safety of the stairs that shielded them.

There, on the next landing, facing away from them, Turk saw the source of the incessant banging.



## Chapter 9

The old man lifted his hands in the air, aimed his pistol toward the ceiling. Sean could tell it was a small-caliber weapon, and felt certain that the bullet wouldn't be able to penetrate his body armor. Plus, the man didn't appear to be the type that would resort to using deadly force. However, Sean had learned long ago not to trust appearances. Why hadn't the man retreated back into the room behind the command room?

"How did you guys get in here?" the old man asked in a thick eastern European accent.

Sean looked at Karl, who didn't appear interested in answering questions.

"Please," the old man said, "I've been trapped in here for ten days. If you got in, that means we can get out. Right? Can we get out?"

"We're not going anywhere," Sean said. "At least, not yet."

The old man nodded and started to take a step back.

"Stop right there, Pops," Karl said. "Step forward and move to that corner." Karl gestured with his head to the corner of the back wall, furthest from the door. "Leave the door open."

The old man complied. He took two steps forward, then sidestepped toward the other side of the room. He made sure to keep the pistol pointed at the ceiling. The look on his face was a mixture of anxiety and excitement. Perhaps he believed they were there to rescue him. Was this the guy who had reached out for help? A shiver ran down Sean's spine at the next thought he had. Did someone in the U.S. government or military know about this guy?

"This far enough?" the old man asked when he reached the corner of the room.

"You can't go any further, can you?" Karl said.

"Suppose not," the old man said.

"Ryder, cover me," Karl said as he started toward the old guy, his MP7 aimed at the man's head. "All right, Pops, lower that arm to the side till it's parallel with the ground."

The man did as he was told. His thin arm shook as he held it perpendicular to his body, locked straight at the elbow, his wrist angled so that the gun pointed toward the ceiling.

Karl approached slowly and cautiously. Sean figured that the SEAL had seen enough, as Sean himself had, to tell him that everyone was a threat inside, and sometimes outside of, hostile territory. A ten-year-old kid could kill you as fast as a trained operative could. Maybe not as gracefully, but he'd kill you all the same. An old man could, too.

Karl reached out and took the pistol from the man. He tucked it away and then turned the guy around, patted him down. Said, "He's clear."

The old man turned around, slowly. "I'm not here to hurt anyone. I just want to go home."

"Yeah, well, don't we all," Karl said.

Sean stepped forward. "Karl, why don't you go check out whatever's behind that door?"

"What if those *things* are down there?"

"Then I doubt he would have been able to come up."

Karl appeared to study the old man for a moment as if the answer were written on the guy's face, then he hiked his shoulders in the air an inch or two and nodded. "Yeah, guess so." He took one last look at the old man, then walked toward the other side of the room.

Sean waited until Karl slipped past the open doorway, then he turned his attention back to the man. "Why don't you sit down?" He gestured toward the seat in front of him, which was also in front of a working computer. He figured the man to be a technician of some sort, maybe one who knew where to find hidden information within the computer's file system.

The old guy took a deep breath and exhaled loudly, then walked toward Sean. "You aren't going to kill me, are you?"

"I don't think so," Sean said. "Don't give me a reason, though."

The old guy's lips lifted at the edges, wrinkling the paper thin skin on his cheeks and crumpling his eyes. He stood motionless for a few seconds before sitting down, his face crinkled like used wrapping paper.

"Who are you?" the old man asked.

"I'm an Air Force PJ," Sean said. "So is that guy over there." He pointed toward Jules, who was leaned back in a chair with his eyes closed.

The smile on the old man's face retreated and he looked somber. "What about the other guy?"

"He's a Navy SEAL." Sean studied the man for a moment, waiting for a reaction, then continued. "There's a team of SEALs here. They're checking out the lower levels now."

The old man shook his head. "They shouldn't do that. Can you call them and get them back up?"

"We're on radio silence. For now. I'm only calling if my life is in danger, and best I can tell, it's not at the moment." He offered up a smile, but the old man didn't react. Sean waited a minute, then asked an obvious question. "Why shouldn't they be down there?"

"It's... it's not safe down there," he said. "Anywhere in here, for that matter. Except for maybe this room. But even then, for how long?" He looked past Sean and his eyes settled on Jules, then he added, "Judging by your partner, it's not safe outside, either."

"Care to tell me why?"

The old guy said nothing. His eyes drifted to the opposite corner of the room.

"Look," Sean said. "You can talk to me, or the SEALs will make you talk. Understand? They have ways to get you to speak if they feel you have information. I'm a PJ. I fix people. Those guys kill people." He lifted an eyebrow and lowered his head. "Now, considering you're the only person we've run into who isn't dead or howling or screaming, the consensus will be that you can provide us with some intel. So why don't you start talking?"

The old man brought his withered hands to his face and pressed his palms into his eyes. Blue veins rose against his flesh and snaked along the backs of his hands and wrists. Brown spots dotted the skin on his arms.

"Where to begin?" he said, shaking his head.

"What's your name?" Sean said.

The man smiled and nodded. "That's a good place to start, I suppose. My name is Richard Knapp." He paused to clear his throat. "Doctor Richard Knapp."

Sean noticed that Knapp held his chin an inch higher as the man added *Doctor* to his name, and he wondered if perhaps Knapp was famous in some circles. He decided to bring him back down to the ground.

"Never heard of you," Sean said.

The man looked disappointed for a moment, then lifted his eyebrows and puffed his cheeks as he forced a large breath out. "Most people haven't, but the ones that have, consider me a legend in the field of—"

"I don't care about all that," Sean said. "Here's what I want to know. What purpose does this building serve? What are those *things* inside of here and roaming around outside of the building? Where the fuck are the Rangers and guys from Delta Force?"

Knapp steepled his fingers together, rubbed his chin with his thumbs. His mouth opened three times, but he didn't say anything. He jerked his head to the side at the sound of footsteps. Karl had reentered the room, and it seemed to have startled Knapp. The man straightened up in his chair while watching the SEAL cross the room and come to a stop next to Sean.

"What's going on?" Karl asked.

"Dr. Knapp here was about to give us some information," Sean said. "What did you find down there?"

"Doctor, huh? Whatever. It's a bunker. Stocked to the hilt. He probably could've lasted three years in here."

Sean turned toward the doctor, saw the man nodding in response to Karl's assumption. "Anyone else down there?"

Karl opened his mouth to answer, however, Knapp cut him off.

"No," Knapp said. "I was the only one fortunate enough to be in this room when *it* happened."

"When what happened?" Sean said.

The old man sighed. "You asked what this place is. Well, simply put, it is a research facility. A biological research facility, to be exact."

Sean had a feeling he knew where this was going, but remained patient and let Knapp tell him in his own words.

"As you can tell," Knapp said, "this place is pretty well hidden. I'd think that if all these different military groups hadn't been by recently, you might not have even noticed it. I'm not sure how those initial men got in here. Wish they hadn't, though. They really set *them* off down below."

"Them?" Karl said.

Sean placed his hand on Karl's forearm, shook his head. "Let him continue."

"Yes," Knapp said. "Them. Anyway, when it happened ten days ago, we were operating on a skeleton crew. One man slipped and hit the wrong button. Instead of securing the cells, he leaves an entire cell block unlocked."

Sean thought back to the diagrams he'd seen of the floors below. He imagined that the big rooms in the corners were what Knapp was referring to when he said cell block. Were the remaining Rangers and members of Delta Force in one of those cells?

"So a group of them got out before I could hit the alarm," Knapp said. "One of them, perhaps one who wasn't completely gone, or changed if you will, had noticed what the guard did and he repeated the process for the remaining cells on the floor. It wasn't long before they made their way to this floor, and who knows where else by this point."

"What are they?" Sean said.

"Humans. Or, they were. Now, they're an experiment gone horribly, horribly wrong."

"This is a research facility for biological warfare, isn't it?" Sean said. "You were..."

Knapp's eyes glistened and he turned away for a moment. When he looked back, he stared at the floor between Sean and himself. "I was forced to come here against my will some years ago. I don't want to go into details about it."

"Someone threatened your life?" Sean said.

The man snorted. "I'd gladly let them take my life if it meant I had never created such a beast."

"They threatened your wife and kids," Karl said.

Knapp looked up with a quick and decisive nod. "Said I had to come here and build them a super-virus. One that could wipe out a population and blow itself out just like that." He snapped his fingers for emphasis. "Our first attempt went fairly well. Over a ninety percent fatality rate." He smiled as if he had unlocked some achievement by killing nine out of ten people.

"What did you test on?" Sean asked, afraid of the answer.

"Humans," Knapp said. "Criminals, mostly. The problem we found in our first attempt was that when new individuals were introduced toward the end of someone's life, they became infected. The virus remained contagious for far too long. That chance that it would cause a global pandemic and send the world to its doom was too great. We were looking at a possible reduction of over ninety percent of the world's population, and that wouldn't cut it."

"Glad to see you maintained an ethical approach," Sean said. "So what did you do? You said we. Are there more like you working on this?" Sean asked.

"Yeah, a couple. Well, they were, but they're gone now." Knapp paused a beat to dab at the tears forming in the corner of his eyes. "Anyhow, we went back to work is what we did. I had been working with H1N1—"

"Swine flu," Karl interrupted.

Knapp's eyebrows rose and he nodded. "The mutation was great, as I said, but it didn't kill itself fast enough. We need the contagious aspect of the virus to die once the cells have been sufficiently attacked, which is something that doesn't take long. You see, it's not a big window, but for most of the areas of the world, population centers, it was plenty of time to spread from person to person and make its way outside of the community."

"It'd have to do that in something like two minutes," Karl said. "No way you could be successful. The world is too connected now."

Knapp smiled. "This would have been a multi-phase attack. I can assure you that if we had been successful, the virus would have only spread so far after each, um, distribution."

"How?" Karl said.

Knapp shrugged. "In some places by force, not allowing people to leave. In other spots by the sheer logistical aspect of it. Time and distance, that sort of thing. They'd never release it on their own soil, that's for sure."

Sean thought about the beings they had encountered outside and in the building, and wondered if Knapp had been successful in completing the next phase of his project. "So what did you do?"

"I tried a few avenues and began working with the rabies virus and variola."

"What's variola?" Karl asked.

"Smallpox."

"But most of the world is vaccinated against smallpox," Karl said.

"Ah, but I create mutations of the microbes that cause the viral infection, and then mutate them even further. I've isolated strands and pulled pieces from here and there and created what I believed to be the ultimate virus for destroying a community of people. It'd blow in and out in a matter of hours, limiting transmissions between hosts and reducing the chances of spread. Say that somehow someone got on a plane to travel overseas or across a country. Well, by the time the plane landed, everyone would be infected, but no one would be contagious." He leaned back against the edge of the workstation. "That's what I'd hoped, at least."

"You can't stop human contact," Karl said. "I hope to God this was meant to be a last resort."

"Those *things* we've seen," Sean said. "They were infected?"

"Yes," Knapp said. "I prefer to say afflicted. Infected sounds treatable."

"We've encountered several. How does this start? I mean, how do you know someone is infected, or afflicted?"

"Coughing, sneezing, fever, fatigue—although I should add that the beings you encountered had been infected long enough that the virus would not have been contagious, unless they inflicted a wound which involved the transfer of bodily fluids."

Sean nodded, thankful that he had not been bitten by one of those *things*. "Then what?"

"Pain, lots of physical pain. You might see uncontrolled movements, an inability to swallow, and there may be sores on the face and hands. The skin seems to lose color. The afflicted may become delusional and hallucinate. Finally, inflammation takes hold, and here's where it gets tricky. Basically, the cells of an organ are attacked until they swell and burst and die."

"Why tricky?" Karl asked.

"Well," Knapp said, "when it is the heart or kidneys or lungs affected, the result is death, and not always immediately. But death, nonetheless. However, and this is only an educated guess because I haven't been able to study it thoroughly, when the brain is attacked, these... mutations occur."

Sean allowed his mind to process the information. He fell back into a chair and looked between Karl and Knapp. Jules coughed in the background, and Knapp pushed off of the desk and looked at him.

"Your friend is infected," Knapp said.

Sean noticed Karl clutch his gun a little tighter and push the barrel away from his chest.

"Bullshit," Sean said. "He's got the flu."

Knapp walked along the back wall and pointed at a wide screen mounted to it.

"From these screens I watched the progress of the virus as it attacked our test subjects." He turned and faced the men. "Look at your partner. See how he sweats in reaction to his core temperature rising? See how his skin, once I assume a healthy brown, is turning gray and ashen? Was he attacked by one of them?"

Sean swallowed hard, taking note of how dry his mouth and throat had become. *An inability to swallow*. The words of the scientist echoed in his brain. Panic tore through his body as he feared that he had become infected. He shook his head, stood, walked toward Jules.

"We encountered one up close," Sean said. "Me and Jules did, after we landed. It came out from the bushes and, it looked like it went through him, but it didn't hurt him,

only knocked him over. I shot it, then he did, and it died.”

“Are you sure it didn’t attack him?” Knapp said.

Sean looked Jules over and noticed a thin line of red seeping through the arm of his friend’s shirt. He pulled out his knife and cut the sleeve near the shoulder and tore it so that it ripped apart. A thick white bandage stained with blood covered Jules’s bicep.

Sean thought back to the night before. The thing had charged past Jules on its way toward him. As it stood before Sean, its mouth hung open, and he recalled seeing strands of saliva. Only it hadn’t been saliva, it had been Jules’s blood strung between the afflicted’s teeth. It had bitten Jules as it had passed by the man.

Sean reached for the bandage.

“I wouldn’t touch that,” Knapp said. “He’s infected.”

Sean straightened, backed up. “Does that mean he’s been transmitting every time he coughed?”

Knapp nodded. “Afraid so. Up to a point, at least. Like I said, the virus moves past a point of contamination.”

“We’re all infected?” Sean said.

The scientist shrugged. “There’s an incubation period that lasts anywhere from two to twenty-four hours, usually on the shorter end of that spectrum. Has anyone shown symptoms similar to a cold or flu?”

Sean thought about it, but couldn’t be sure whether anyone had or not. He shrugged and offered an *I don’t know* gesture.

Knapp started to walk toward the open doorway in the back wall. “Well, I think I should return to my room seeing as how you won’t be rescuing me. I’m afraid you might try to kill me, if you don’t die, that is.”

Sean pulled his M9 and aimed it at the man’s head. He walked to the door, slammed it shut. “You aren’t going anywhere, old man. You created this, you can cure it.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Knapp said. “The virus mutated beyond my control, and I have reason to believe that it continues to do so.”

Sean grimaced as he stifled a yell. A moment later, he said, “Tell me about mortality rates.”

“This is all extrapolation, understand. I don’t have accurate numbers. But on a global scale,” Knapp looked up to the right as if he was performing calculations in his head, “I’d estimate that ninety-nine point five percent of the world’s population would succumb to the virus, with approximately nine in ten dying. That is if it were unleashed.”

“And the other one in ten?” Karl asked.

“I believe you’ve encountered them already.”

“What about the point five percent who don’t succumb?” Sean asked.

“Those are the ones who are somehow immune. We’ve seen it down here. Of course in this environment, they are killed by the one in ten afflicted who go on to mutate. So it could be that the point five takes longer to show symptoms.” Knapp paused. “I believe they are immune to the initial virus. Would they succumb to another strain, or after being attacked, I can’t be sure since none of them ever survived the attacks of the deranged beings down below.”

Sean grabbed a chair and placed it ten feet away from Jules. He then sat down, facing his friend, who leaned back in a chair, unconscious. Jules’s body began to

convulse.

"What can you tell us about them?" Karl asked. "I mean, we know we have to shoot them in the head to kill them. But what else?"

Knapp nodded and seemed to contemplate the question. "I don't necessarily think shooting them in the head is required for their death. It's that they are able to tolerate significant pain because their brains have been, for lack of a better word, destroyed. Maybe damaged makes more sense. On the one hand, they are primal beings, and the *human* part of their brains, that which gives them what you might call a soul, is all but lost. But I have noticed some interesting things when watching them. Some of them seem to follow a sort of social structure, if you will. Not all, mind you. There are outliers who are loners. But there are also weaker ones, ones who seem adverse to killing, and a few who seem to hold on to some thread of humanity."

"Outside," Sean said, "there was a woman. One of those afflicted, but clearly a woman. And she hung out by the graveyard." He looked at Knapp, but saw no notice of recollection on the man's face.

"What graveyard?"

"If you're looking down at the entrance from the hill, it's to the left."

"I'm not aware of any graveyard there."

"There's mounds, fresh dirt, dozens of them."

"Interesting," Knapp said. "No, this is fascinating. They are burying the others, the ones who don't make it. Tell me, when they—"

Sean held a hand in the air. "I'm not through."

"Okay."

Sean got to the point. "How do they move so fast?"

Knapp nodded. "I've seen that, too. Both on the screens and in the halls. It doesn't seem to happen to all of them, though. It seems when they have a purpose, they are capable of moving quite fast. I attribute that to mutations in the muscular system. Not only can they run faster, but they cover more distance with each step. But, without being able to study a body with the purpose of looking for that, I don't know for sure."

"Who else knows about this place?" Sean said. "Not knows it's here. I mean, who knows what goes on here?"

Knapp shrugged as he looked from Sean to Jules. He said, "Your friend is waking up."

## Chapter 10

Her hair rose upward like a puff of steam, pluming with every forward jerk of her head. It hovered for a moment, then cascaded down across her shoulders and back. Soft and blond, it looked like fine silk or satin. Rivers of blood flowed down the concrete wall from the point of her forehead's impact. It gathered into a puddle on the floor, growing thicker and wider by the second. Her gown was ripped down the middle, between her shoulder blades to the hem. Hanging open, it revealed pale skin covering her back and ass and legs. Clusters of black and purple and blue marks spotted her body. Her hands hung by her sides, clenching into fists with each successful meeting between flesh and bone and concrete.

"Miss?" Turk said.

He felt the eyes of his men fall upon him, burning a hole into his back. He didn't know why he spoke. He could tell she was one of *them*, one of those *things*. But she didn't appear to be a threat, much like the woman Sean had pointed out to him in the graveyard. She was a poor soul who somehow ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and had her humanity torn from her fleshy cage.

"Miss?" he said again, louder.

The woman stopped and took a step back. Blood trickled into the bare gray spots on the concrete floor where the soles of her feet had been. She turned her head to the left. The skin on her forehead was shredded and bloodied, her skull crushed inward. Crimson liquid covered her eyelids, stained her cheeks, dripped off her chin onto her chest and shoulders. She shuffled in a semi-circle, lifting her feet an inch or two at a time, until she faced Turk and the rest of the men. Her hands rose to her face and clumsily wiped the blood from her eyes, smearing the thick fluid that had begun to cake on her cheeks.

She let out a noise like a moan as her arms fell to her side. Her eyes were bright brown, but distant. She looked at the men, yet right through them as if she saw something else. Something beyond her reach. Perhaps a memory of her old life, thought Turk. Or maybe he and his team didn't appear like humans to her. Maybe not to any of those *things*. Did they look evil to her? And if so, was she perhaps figuring out how to kill them?

He'd seen how fast some of those *things* could move, and began to anticipate her coming toward him.

She groaned a little louder, and it appeared as though her eyes began to water. A tear pooled and fell across her cheek, mixing with some of the thinner blood before falling to the floor, leaving a pinkish trail in its wake. She held out her hands, palms up, thumbs out. Her head tilted to the side. Her mouth dropped open, revealing red gums and cracked, stained teeth.

"What does she want?" Ruiz said.

"To die," Turk said. He lifted his MK 14 and aimed at the woman's head. The right corner of her mouth twitched upward and the glow in her eyes intensified. He wondered if she realized what his intentions were, and if so, did she consider it a favor. He cast all thoughts aside and took a deep breath. Then, he pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through her head, blowing out the back of her skull and scattering bone



and brain and more blood onto the wall behind her. Her body remained upright for a moment before collapsing to the floor.

No one spoke. Killing an unarmed woman was not something any of the men set out to do that day. But was it really a woman anymore? From what they'd seen, one of those *things* could take a man down in under a second. She had to be killed. There was no question about that.

"Come on," Turk said reluctantly.

He took the stairs, caring a little less about how much noise he made. The landing butted up to a solid concrete wall and another set of stairs descended in the opposite direction. He imagined the ceilings on the next floor would be high. Or maybe, the ceiling itself was extra thick. This building could have been around for a while, and perhaps was a fallout shelter at some point. For who, though? There wasn't anyone near here. No major cities, or small ones, for that matter.

Twenty-four stairs later they stood in front of a reinforced steel door. On the other side of the landing was another set of stairs. Turk thought back to the blueprints for the third floor, and he knew that's where those steps led. He hoped to be descending them soon, but first they had to clear the room that hid behind the door.

They had to enter the second floor.

The humming sound that had been present their entire stay now seemed to rise through the stairwell. Turk looked up at the fluorescent light fixture attached to the underside of the landing above. The bulb winked yellow and white at him. He looked from the fixture, to the ceiling, to the wall. Four lines of crimson fluid seeped through the gap between the steel landing above and the concrete wall.

Collins and Brady managed to get the door unlocked around the same time Turk decided to forget about the woman he'd killed moments ago.

"It's ready, Turk," Collins said.

"All right, listen up," Turk said. "I don't have any grand illusions that we're going to find our guys behind this door. Not alive, at least." Fear rose like bile inside him, and he took a moment to compose himself. There was comfort in knowing that he was surrounded by some of the finest soldiers he'd ever had the opportunity to serve alongside. "You need to be quick, and quiet, and decisive. I'd like to say we can take our time and identify whether or not our targets are hostile. We can't, though. If it ain't dressed in ACUs, blow its fucking head off."

No one argued. They all nodded. Each man seemed to understand, or perhaps accept, that they were dealing with something their training had never prepared them for. How could it?

"On my signal," Turk said.

He lifted his hand, gave the command. The team entered the room and split to the left and right, staying close to the wall. The first thing that hit Turk was the stench. The room smelled rotten, a mixture of decomposing bodies and feces. He heard men stifle the bile that rose in their throats as they adjusted to the smell of death.

After the burning in his eyes and nose subsided, Turk realized that the room was dimmer than rest of the building. It seemed that one out of every five lights had been smashed or simply no longer worked. His eyes adjusted to the dark setting and he began to make out shapes, most of which were scattered along the floor. Bodies, he figured, dead bodies. The hum from the lighting was faint, but still present. In a way, Turk found it comforting. As long as that hum was there, he'd get out of the place in one piece. Hopefully alive.

The room wasn't exactly as he expected it to be, based on the blueprints. For one, there was no wall running through the center. It was large and open, with four cellblocks, one in each corner. The cells were open air, enclosed on all four sides and on top by thick steel bars. There was one main gate leading to each block of cells. The gates were all open.

After determining that nothing in the room was moving other than the SEAL team, Turk began to cross the floor. He took three steps and slipped, managing to regain his balance without having to place his hand on the floor, and into whatever he'd slipped on. It crossed his mind to shine his light down to check it out, but he decided against it. Better to not know.

After fifteen feet, it became impossible to walk through the room without stepping on a body. This time he did pull out his light and panned it across the floor. The sight repulsed him. The first thing he noticed was that not a single body was left undisturbed. In some cases, faces were missing, torsos had been ripped open, entrails strung about, flesh torn from various body parts. There were a few that had bullet holes in their foreheads. Presumably they were the beings they'd seen scattered about. After he had processed the gruesome sight, Turk began to take note of the clothing they wore. Most of the bodies were clothed in stained gowns, like those they'd seen being worn by the previous beings they'd encountered. A few of the bodies were wearing khaki pants and white or blue pullover shirts. Drop holsters were attached to their thighs and utility belts strapped around their waists. Security, Turk figured. They'd done an awful friggin' job. Finally, he noticed several men with M4s clutched in their dead hands, their bodies clothed in ACUs.

*Rangers.*

The bodies of the men they'd been sent to rescue. Would they even be able to recover them?

The buzzing sound in the room increased. Were dead lights returning to life? Turk wouldn't argue if they did. At the very least he'd like to collect each man's dog tags to be returned to their families.

"What the...?" one of his men said from behind.

A series of screams and shrieks erupted from across the room.

Turk looked up and swung his flashlight side-to-side, the glow lighting up the darkest recesses of the room.

Dozens of green and blue and brown eyes reflected against the high powered beam.

The screams grew louder.

"Open fire!" Turk yelled.

# Chapter 11

Jules wrapped his hands around the chair's armrests, leaned forward and coughed, something he'd been doing more frequently since waking. Sean thought that he'd noticed a few drops of blood mixed in with the man's saliva.

"How're you feeling?" Sean asked.

Jules shook his head. The motion was anything but fluid. His chest and shoulders convulsed. "Not... not so... good." He tried to smile, but his upper lip only managed to jerk up a couple times on the left side of his face.

Sean wanted to approach his friend and comfort him. But he didn't. He was scared. Scared for what Jules was going through, as well as what was to come. Sean was under no delusions that his friend was going to make it out of this alive. He was also frightened by the prospect that in the next few hours, he too might be suffering in the same manner.

Jules fell forward and placed his head between his knees as he coughed. The floor below him became spattered with thick dark mucus and blood. He stopped coughing and pushed off of his knees and lifted his head. Blood that originated from the corner of his eyes dripped down his cheeks. The spasms seemed to have stopped, for the moment at least.

*Welcome relief*, Sean thought, *if only for a few brief seconds*.

"What's happening to him?" Sean said, looking away from Jules and toward Knapp.

Knapp sighed as he leaned forward in his chair and studied Jules for a moment.

"Looks like he's ruptured his sinuses. Now, is that from all the coughing, or the cause of all of it? Does it matter? He doesn't have much time left."

"Give me a real answer," Sean said.

"A real answer." The old man seemed to contemplate humoring Sean. "The microbes are attacking the cells in his body, infesting and feasting on them," Knapp said. "They'll continue to do so until each cell can take no more, at which point it bursts and dies. Judging by the amount of coughing and the blood and mucus, I'd say it's his lungs that are being destroyed."

Sean shook his head, looking between Knapp and Jules, saying nothing.

"I know you don't want to hear this," Knapp said, "but the best thing you can do is take your gun and place it to your friend's head, then pull the trigger."

Sean's eyes welled up at the thought, more so because he had been thinking it himself. He didn't need Knapp to tell him that killing his friend would be the right thing to do. He looked at Jules, and saw the man nodding.

"Do it," Jules whispered between heavy shivers. He brought his hand to his face and wiped across his nose, dragging a thick line of bloody mucus over his cheek. His breathing was ragged and sporadic. "Do it."

Sean stood and unholstered his M9. He stepped forward and extended his arm. He tried to take aim, but his forearm and wrist were shaking and prevented him from lining up an accurate shot. He reached out with his left hand, cupped his right, and steadied himself. Tears blurred his vision, distorting his best friend's face. It wasn't murder, he told himself. At worst, assisted suicide. Jules was dead no matter what.

The man lacked the strength or wherewithal to turn his own gun on himself, and therefore relied on Sean to do it for him.

"Get it... over... with."

Sean rotated his head and blinked to clear the tears from his eyes. He took aim and placed his finger on the trigger. The plating was cold against the pad of his fingertip.

"Now!" Jules managed to yell.

Sean let out a guttural scream. "I can't do it." He lowered his weapon to the floor and his head followed.

"Get out of the way," Karl said. "I'll put him out of his misery."

Sean looked up. First thing he saw was Jules straighten his body and lean his head back. The man's lips quivered and rose and fell in a tepid attempt at a smile. His shoulders broadened, then he pulled them back. He was making a target out of himself. Sean knew then that Jules was prepared to die.

Sean felt Karl push past him, a Sig Sauer P226 in his right hand. Karl lifted his arm and took aim at Jules.

"Don't," Sean said. "Don't you fucking shoot him."

"Look at him, Sean. He wants to die."

"Die... want..." Jules said.

"Then I'll do it," Sean said. "I'm his best friend. I'll do it."

Karl turned his head and looked Sean in the eye. He lowered his pistol, letting it hang by his side. "Have at it."

Sean took another step forward, but instead of aiming his side arm at Jules, he pointed it at the scientist.

The old man threw his hands in the air and pushed back in his chair with his legs.

"What can you do for him?" Sean said through clenched teeth.

"Wh-what?" Knapp said.

"I know you can do something for him, old man. What?"

"I-I don't... there's nothing we can do."

"Easy there, Sean," Karl said.

Sean knew that Karl didn't give two craps about Knapp. His primary concern was most likely whether or not Sean had flipped, and if so, how he would deal with it.

"What can I do for him?" Sean said.

The old man shook his head. His eyes locked onto Sean's and he rose from his seat. He took a step forward and waited, presumably to see how Sean would react. When Sean did nothing, the man took another few steps, coming to a stop a few feet in front of him. "I'm sorry. There's nothing that can be done."

"No," Sean said as tears welled in his eyes. "You did this to him. You made this. You have to know how to fix it."

Knapp nodded. "I'm as much of a monster as those *things* that roam the halls, encasing me in this small tomb." His hands gestured through the air around him. "I let things get out of hand, that is true. But know this, if there were a way for me to cure him, I would."

Sean grabbed the man by his collar and pulled him close. He pressed the barrel of his gun under the scientist's cheek, jamming it tight to the bone. Knapp's eyes grew wide and he stuttered, but couldn't get a word out.

"One of these," Sean said, "is reserved for you."

He released his grip and pushed the old man back a few feet, never breaking his stare.

"Sean," Karl said.

"What?"

"Look, man. Look at Jules."

Sean blinked and turned toward his partner. The tortured expression on Jules's face had relented. He now looked calm and at peace. Jules lifted his eyelids, revealing eyes that reflected the light around them, glowing with the color of amber. He shut them tight. His deep breaths became ragged and loud.

"What in the name of all that's holy?" Sean said.

Knapp stepped forward, stopping within two feet of Jules. He leaned over and inspected the man. Jules eyes opened wide, causing Knapp to fall backward onto a desktop.

"He's turned," Knapp said. "Oh my God, he's turned. Kill him. Do it now!"

Karl brought his arms up and extended his pistol. "You better do this Sean, or I'm going to."

Sean walked up to his friend and knelt in front of him. He reached out with his left hand, placing it on Jules's shoulder. He gave his friend a reassuring squeeze and a half-smile. Jules returned the smile, closed his eyes, and leaned his head back. He looked at peace, something that Sean was sure would fade soon as Jules transformed further into one of the afflicted.

Sean rose and walked around the chair. He placed the barrel of his gun against the back of Jules's head. Then, closing his eyes and reciting a prayer he learned as a child, Sean pulled the trigger and ended his best friend's life.

The shot echoed throughout the room and the smell of cordite filled Sean's nose, causing him to cough in an attempt to flush the smell and taste from his mouth.

"I'll move him," Karl said, already pushing Sean out of the way. Karl lifted his right arm and coughed into the crook of his elbow. "Hope I'm not coming down with this." He smiled at Sean. "If I am, there better be someone else around to kill me. You take too damn long."

Sean smiled, unsure of the reason why. He tried to convince himself that it wasn't Jules he'd killed. Jules was gone, replaced by a monster.

"It had to be done," Knapp said. His tone was sharp, and his speech curt.

"No," Sean said. "It didn't. It's because of you it had to be done. It's because of you that these beings wander the halls and the area outside, lost and confused, full of deranged thoughts leading them to kill. It's because of you that U.S. soldiers are dead."

"Don't take that tone with me," Knapp said. "You sons of bitches, Americans, you did this to yourself. Who do you think funds this place? Nigeria? Get over yourself, man. You brought this upon yourself."

Sean lunged and extended his hands. His palms lifted the old man by his chest and he hoisted him into the air and threw him against the wall. Knapp's body hit with a thud and fell to the floor, causing him to land on his side. He yelled in pain, then groaned.

Sean rushed up to him. "What's in your pocket?"

Knapp looked up while feeling around for his glasses. He found them, and then placed them on his head.

Sean started feeling around Knapp's shirt and chest. He'd felt something in his shirt pocket. Something hard. Was the old guy carrying another weapon, waiting for the right moment to use it?

"Get away from me," Knapp yelled as he fought and clawed against the intrusion.

Sean wrapped his left hand around Knapp's collar, then balled his right hand into a fist. He struck the old man across the face. Knapp's body went limp. Sean reached inside Knapp's breast pocket and pulled out a syringe, capped on the end. He held it out in front of him, stretched across both palms. He couldn't tell if it was empty or full, so he stood and walked over to stand underneath the brightest light. Tilting each end of the syringe up then down, he saw fluid moving inside the tube.

The doctor sat with his back against the wall, watching Sean.

"What's in this syringe?" Sean said.

Knapp shook his head.

Sean aimed his gun at the man, noticing that bits of blood, skull and hair were stuck to the end of the barrel. "Tell me."

"It's an antidote," Knapp said, lowering his eyes. "The only one left. There's a couple doses in there at most."

Sean felt the room start to spin, and his knees went weak. He could have saved Jules if only he'd pressed Knapp harder. But he didn't. He'd murdered Jules when his life could have been spared. He steadied himself by placing his left hand on the back of a chair. Then he reached down with his right and retrieved his M9.

"You son of a bitch," he said as he lifted his arm and aimed the gun at Knapp's head. He didn't bother to steady himself, or to think it over. He simply pulled the trigger.

## Chapter 12

The bullet tore through his forehead, ripping off half of his skull. His body bowed backward into the wall, then folded over itself as it fell to the floor, leaving behind a silhouette of blood and brain and bone.

"Got you, you bastard," Turk yelled.

All around him bullets flew from the barrels of the SEALs' MK 14 EBRs and their HK MP7 submachine guns. Turk watched the advancing line of the beings, picking off the ones that broke from the ranks and charged them. For some reason, they moved at a slow pace while crossing the room. He presumed that not all of them had the ability to move as quickly. But in a group as large as the one they faced, there had to be at least a few. Was it because of the bodies that littered the floor, blocking a clear path? That had to be it. They couldn't cross the distance because of all the debris, if you could call the fleshy shells that a soul once occupied debris. He then recalled that one had tried, but tripped and crashed to the floor. It was the act of falling that had caught Turk's attention, and now he knew that was because he hadn't seen it move from the wall to the body because it had covered the distance in no time at all.

He noticed several of their shots were hitting the things in their chests. While not an ideal shot, it did slow them down even further and caused additional congestion within their ranks. As they bodies piled up, the shots became easier to pull off. Turk didn't have to readjust his sights as much in order to line up his shot. He'd hit one and it'd go down and the next would be right behind the one he'd wounded or killed a moment before. He took a moment to survey the line and saw the other SEALs were operating in much the same manner as him.

The beings weren't organized. If they had managed to work together, it wouldn't have even been a match. Close to a hundred of them and only ten SEALs. With the speed and power those *things* possessed, Turk estimated they should have been able to kill half of them, at most. But now there were only a couple dozen left.

He continued to pick them off, one at a time. Tall, short, fat, thin. It didn't matter to him. He killed indiscriminately, like they did. He remained calm when he had to reload, as did his men. Every time they did, the line of beings advanced a little further. Despite that, the SEALs maintained control and stayed focused on the task at hand. Maybe they hadn't been trained for this exact scenario, but their training prepared them to handle anything and to think outside the box. That skill was necessary now more than ever.

Turk noticed the remaining beings changed tactics. They had been shuffling through the bodies, dragging their feet on the ground and pushing the corpses around. One stepped up and stood on top of a body. Not an easy task for the clumsy being. It bounced around a few times before settling in.

Turk took aim, but not before he caught a glimpse of the other afflicted doing the same. He squeezed the trigger, perhaps a second too soon, and shot the being in the shoulder. It jerked back, then squared up. Before Turk could fire again, the guy was right in front of him, reaching for Turk's gun.

Turk pulled back and fell to the floor. He yelled, but knew that amid the gunfire, no one would hear him. The being held the barrel of his weapon, and no matter how hard

Turk tugged, its grip would not loosen. Turk angled the gun, then fired. The round entered underneath its chin and blew out the top of its head.

Turk scooted back until he found the wall. He used it to help him get to his feet. He saw four of his men falling back, firing wildly at the remaining beings who huddled together around the other five members of his team. The group had all charged at the same time and overtook the five SEALs in the blink of an eye. It was pure luck that they didn't follow the first one through and converge on Turk.

Turk looked back at the surviving men and yelled, "Go! Get your asses out of here."

The gunfire ceased as Brady, Schmitt, Bates and Steele escaped through the door into the stairwell.

The buzzing sound increased as the *things* bit and tore through the flesh of his men, not all of who were dead yet. Turk heard their pained screams and cries for help. Ruiz's head poked out from the pile of carnage. His eyes were open, staring right at Turk. His mouth was wide, but he couldn't scream.

Turk aimed his rifle and fired, sending a bullet through the top of Ruiz's skull. He kept his sights on the group as he walked backward toward the stairwell door, firing every few steps. One of his men flung the door open as he approached. Turk turned and ran the remaining distance.

They huddled together behind the closed door. The stairwell, though open and far from safe, provided them with respite from the feeding frenzy going on in the room.

"We're gonna open that door and we're gonna kill the rest of those damned *things* and send them back to hell," Turk said. "If you don't think you can do it, then turn your gun on yourself right now."

He didn't wait for them to respond. Turk ripped the door open and stepped back into the room. Stopped. Aimed. Fired. He heard the other four men do the same. One by one they picked off the feasting beings. The afflicted didn't even stop to see why their fellow beings were falling to the ground. The final shots were fired and the last one fell. The hush that fell over the room was matched in intensity only by the heavy odor of cordite.

Turk scanned the area, looking for signs of life, whether human or *them*. Nothing moved. But, for the first time, he noticed a faint trace of light from the other side of the room, in front of the cell block.

"You guys see that?" he said.

"Yeah," Bates said. "Is that...?"

"Come with me," Turk said. "Rest of you, cover us. Anything moves, kill it. Don't second guess. Shoot."

Turk remained close to the wall, rubbing his left shoulder against it. The perimeter of the room, for some reason, had remained clear. Battle was chaotic. He supposed random chance could have intervened and left the bodies in the center of the room. However, his gut told him that someone had moved the bodies that had fallen on the outer perimeter of the room, sweeping them toward the center. *Just like trash*, he thought.

The humming increased in intensity as they once again approached the light source. He saw a five foot wide by fifteen foot long grate in the floor. Rebar crisscrossed the opening, leaving four or five inch gaps.

"Jesus H. Christ," Turk said.

"Is that...?" Bates said.



Turk nodded, taking in the sight of seven men dressed in ACUs, trapped in the corner of the room below, protected from a horde of those *things* by a few steel bars.

"Can we reach them from here?" Bates asked.

Turk leaned forward and placed his hands on his knees. "Even if we could, they're surrounded by steel on all four sides *and* on the top. We'd have to figure out how to open the cage to get them out."

"Look at all them down there," Bates said, pointing at the masses of beings that stood shoulder to shoulder with their gazes fixed on the men in the cage. "No way we can wade through that shit."

Turk knew this was true, but he also realized that they had the perfect vantage point to thin out the group. "We can start shooting them from here. If our guys down there can open the cell, maybe they can make a break for it."

"There's too many of those damn *things*, Turk," Bates said. "We don't have the ammunition."

"Then we'll get some," Turk yelled. "We'll get another damn team out here."

Bates shook his head. "Let's go before we all end up dead, or worse." His eyes scanned the sea of afflicted below them.

"We're not leaving them here," Turk said. "Not like this. Not surrounded by those creatures."

Bates said nothing. He didn't even bother to look at Turk while the team leader yelled at him. And with good reason, Turk saw as he followed the man's stare. Not only had Bates heard him loud and clear, so had most of the beings below them. They stood with their heads back, arms lifted up, mouths agape, staring up at the two men.

"You want some of this," Turk yelled at them. "Come get it."

He stuck the barrel of his gun through one of the openings between the rebar and began shooting. Every shot penetrated a forehead, and the beings either dropped, or fell against the others, sandwiched and unable to fall.

Turk learned something new at that moment. The bastards couldn't only run fast, they could also jump high.

A pale hand wrapped around the rebar, another around the barrel of his gun. He felt the gun pulled through the opening until it reached a spot where the hilt was too wide. Before he could back up, the thing grabbed a hold of Turk's wrist and pulled his right forearm through a gap. He saw its mouth open, yellow teeth glistening with saliva. The beast was hungry, hell, starving after staring at the men in the cell below for so long. No matter how hard Turk pulled back, the thing wouldn't let go.

When he glanced at Bates, he saw the man was lying on his side, his neck wide open and squirting blood. The thing had moved so fast that Turk didn't see it strike the man. Now, it had a hold of him.

He began to think about his wife and two sons. Turk pushed the thoughts from his mind as they would only hinder him in this situation. He wouldn't let the decrepit thing on the other side of the grate take his life.

He reached across his body for his side arm. The cool handle met the sweaty flesh of his palm, giving him hope, for a moment, that he'd escape the situation with both his hand and his life. He twisted and took aim. The beast sunk its teeth into Turk's arm before he could get the shot off. Turk screamed in pain and unloaded his magazine into the disfigured face below him.

## Chapter 13

"Jesus, Ryder!" Karl yelled. "What're you doing?"

Sean watched Knapp's body slide along the wall to the right, leaving a crimson trail in its wake. He walked up to the corpse and nudged the dead man's shoulder with the tip of his boot, looking for any reaction or sign of life. The old man had created these *things* that wandered the halls and outside the facility. Perhaps he had found a way to turn him into one without the side effects. Still, Sean figured it'd be damn hard for anyone to survive with half of their brain plastered to a wall.

"Ryder," Karl said.

Sean didn't respond. He turned his head toward Jules's body, then back toward Knapp.

"Ryder," Karl said again.

"What?" Sean said.

"We needed him alive, man."

"Sorry," Sean said flatly.

"He probably had more info. Turk would have wanted to talk to him."

Sean turned to face Karl. He cleared his throat, then said, "You think Turk's still alive? When's the last time we heard from him, huh?" He paused and lifted an eyebrow. "We haven't. They walked down into the depths of this place. Straight into the pits of hell. They're gone, Karl. And they left us up here with patient zero." He gestured with his head to the woman who stood outside the room with her forehead pressed against the glass. Then he glanced toward Knapp. "And this old coot."

Karl coughed into his hand, then said, "Look, Sean, I know you're distraught after what happened with Jules. But, —"

"You're sick," Sean said. "You've got it."

Karl's grip on his MP7 tightened as he took a step back, placing himself out of Sean's immediate reach.

"Your skin's changing already," Sean said.

"Jules was sick, I'm sick, and you're probably sick, Sean." Karl paused, perhaps waiting for a reaction. When Sean said nothing, he continued. "But I need you to get it together, man. We need to find Turk and get out of this damn place."

Sean relaxed his grip on his pistol as he considered Karl's words. They only had to get through two sections of hallway to reach the tunnel that led out of the building. It had only taken them so long to reach the command room because they had no idea what lie beyond their position. But now, they'd be hauling ass to get out, after they found Turk of course.

*If they tried to find him.*

"Turk and the others walked down to their death," Sean said.

"We're all brothers," Karl said.

Sean contemplated this, but did not offer a reply.

"I'm going down there, Ryder. I won't hold it against you if you don't come along."

Sean turned away from Karl and crossed the room. He stopped in front of Jules and lowered his head. That wasn't his friend in front of him. Not the man that he'd spent the better part of the last eight years with, bunking together before Sean and

Kathy were married. Jules followed suit shortly after when he found Marie. He knew that their daughters would still play together, and their wives would sit on the porch and chat about whatever it is two married women talk about. But never again would he and Jules share a couple cold beers on a hot August day, talking about nothing at all, while waiting for their next mission. He wished they could have one more conversation, but he knew there was no point in wishing. He had to save himself, and he had to save Turk, because maybe the man had a best friend and a wife and a kid or two at home who needed him. Sean reached out and grabbed Jules's dog tags, snatching them off of his neck. He wiped them on his pants leg, removing the sticky blood, and then placed them in his pocket. There were two tags. One for a wife, and one for a daughter. Both of whom would never see Jules again.

"You with me, Ryder?" Karl asked, now positioned a few feet behind Sean.

Sean had been so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't heard the man approach.

"Yeah. Let's go get them, and then get moving."

"Okay. But first, let me scan through the computer one more time. If there's anything on here that can help us, I want to bring it."

Sean nodded. He took one last look at Jules, then turned toward the front of the room. The woman still stood outside, centered between the door and the other end of the room. She leaned forward with her forehead planted against the glass, leaving her body at an angle. Her arms dangled straight down with her fingers spread wide. Blood covered her right hand. Dirt caked her left.

Sean stopped in front of her, about six inches away from the window. The woman's eyes, which had been fixed on nothing, rose to meet his. Her facial expression showed no discernible change as she took in his face. Her eyes didn't narrow, or become duller or brighter. She simply stared at him, into his eyes. But did she really see him? Sean leaned in and placed his forehead against the glass. Their eyes were no more than two inches apart. He noticed tears starting to well up along the bottom of her eyelids. When the thin flap of skin could contain them no longer, they pushed past the corners of her eyes and cut a trail through her dirt smeared cheeks. He wondered what thoughts went through her mind. Hell, did she still have thoughts of the sort that he would be able to comprehend? Was her soul trapped behind that pale, ghastly exterior? Were her tears an effort at communicating with him in a way she could no longer vocalize?

Did an angel lurk behind a demon's exterior?

"Hey, Karl," Sean said.

"Yeah," Karl said.

"You think these are zombies?"

Karl chuckled for a second, then said, "Maybe." He coughed, then cleared his throat before adding, "Hell, who's gonna tell us we're wrong to call them that?"

Sean smiled at Karl's statement. Who could tell him he's wrong? No one, because he was the only one living this nightmare.

"Zombies it is," Sean said.

"I'm not finding much on this computer," Karl said.

Sean wondered if the man had changed the subject on purpose. He looked over his shoulder, then said, "Give up looking for info and see if you can get those monitors working. I'd like to see what we're about to walk into."

Karl said nothing in reply, but a flurry of fingers striking against a keyboard told Sean that the man had been receptive to the idea.

When Sean turned his back toward the window again, he saw that the woman had raised her hands to her shoulders and placed them against the glass. Her palms and the pads of her fingers were lined with cuts and crusted blood. Dirt was packed into a wide gash in her left palm. He thought back to the cemetery and wondered if the dirt on her hand had come from one of the mounds he saw outside the facility. Had she buried a loved one there? Or had she been searching for someone already buried there? Maybe a loved one who now only existed in the recesses of her damaged brain? He had a feeling that the dirt covering her hand perhaps correlated to the sadness that caused the tears that streamed down her face a few minutes earlier.

"Got one," Karl said.

The words bounced around inside Sean's head for a moment before he realized what the man was talking about. He backed away from the window and turned and began scanning the monitors on the wall. The one that hung above Knapp's dead body flickered on and began to show a scene that made Sean's heart skip a beat and his stomach sink.

"I don't know what these codes mean," Karl said.

"Forget them," Sean said. "Look."

The screen zoomed in and out of focus and the lighting went from dark to bright and back to dark again. The picture settled in somewhere in the middle. The monitor displayed a scene out of a horror film. A room full of zombies packed shoulder to shoulder. They swayed, perhaps in rhythm, and they all seemed to be focused on something just off the screen.

"Can you pan around?" Sean asked.

"Let me see," Karl said.

A moment later the picture on the screen started moving, sending the current crop of zombies to the bottom corner of the monitor. When the camera reached the other end of the room, Sean said, "Stop." The scene was the same, but different. The zombies were still packed tight to one another, however a group of them stared upward. He saw one that appeared to be hanging from the ceiling, half of the right side of its head missing, its body limp.

"What is that?" Sean said, inching closer to the monitor. He reached out and pointed to the upper left corner. "Can you zoom in on that area?"

As the camera started to zoom, Sean noticed one of the zombie's head erupt into a cloud of blood.

"Holy shit! Stop!" Sean said.

The picture froze and Sean noticed two things. One, zombies were being picked off one at a time. He saw one flinch and fall, then another. Sometimes their heads erupted. Other times their bodies collapsed. As Sean scanned the monitor, he noticed that behind the cells in the corner were seven faces of men he didn't know, but instantly recognized.

"Good news and bad news," Sean said.

"Good news first," Karl said.

"Turk," Sean paused to wipe his brow, "or someone on your team, is alive and above that floor. They're picking off zombies from up there."

"Bad news?"

"I found the guys from Delta."

"Where?"

"In the back corner of that room."

Karl said nothing.

"Locked in a cage."

"Let's get going," Karl said.

"We need to figure out what to do about her," Sean said.

He turned around, but the woman was gone. He rushed forward and pressed against the glass, trying to look down the hallway to the left and the right. She was nowhere to be seen. They were at a disadvantage since the room was recessed from the hall. After five feet, there was a good portion of the corridor they were blind to. For all Sean knew, the woman waited outside with an army of zombies waiting to tear them apart limb by limb.

"Where'd that bitch go?" Karl said.

"I don't know," Sean said. "Hopefully back outside."

"All right, here's what we're going to do." Karl paused for a moment too long.

"What?" Sean said.

"You're not going to like this."

"What?"

"We need to use Jules as bait."

"What do you mean?"

"Toss him into the hall."

"Hell with that," Sean said. "Use the doctor. They probably hate him and will attack him on sight."

Karl seemed to consider this. His lips worked side to side. His eyebrows rose, and his eyes looked up, as if he was performing some complex calculation in his head.

"Okay," Karl said. "We'll use Knapp. Give me a hand."

Sean grabbed the old man by his legs while Karl scooped him off the floor by placing his arms around Knapp's chest from behind. He wasn't a heavy guy, and it didn't require much effort to carry him to the door. They stopped. Sean dropped Knapp's legs. He reached for the door handle, stopping to take a deep breath before turning the knob.

"Nice and easy," Karl said.

Sean pulled the door open, exercising caution. He had one hand on the knob, the other around the handle of his M9. He'd have preferred his submachine gun at that moment, but felt he had better control with his pistol in this situation. He stopped when the door was open wide enough to push Knapp's body through.

"All right," Karl said. "I'm going to shove him. Get ready to close the door when I'm clear, but leave it open a crack. If she pounces, I'm taking her out. But, you better be ready to back me up in case I don't have time to get her."

Sean nodded. He felt a pang of concern travel through his body, then cast it aside. One way or another they were dead. He was sure of it. He figured they ought to send as many of those damned creatures to hell before he and Karl finally bit it.

Knapp's body hit the floor with a thud and slid about four feet, coming to a stop in the middle of the hall. Sean felt his stomach knot. His heart beat faster than he cared to calculate, knowing it would only serve to send him deeper into panic.

Ten seconds passed, nothing happened. Were these zombies smarter than he anticipated? He was sure she'd pounce the moment the body hit the ground, yet here they were, precious seconds ticking by and nothing happening.

"Okay," Karl said. "Another fifteen seconds and we move."

Sean nodded and began counting down from fifteen. He never reached one.

"Screw it," Karl said. "Let's go."

Karl squeezed through the doorway before Sean could say anything. He found himself rushing to get out of the room. On some level, the decisive action taken by Karl helped Sean. He forgot about his pulse and breathing and the panic that coursed through his veins with every beat of his heart. He couldn't forget the situation they were in, though. Not that he'd want to. At least, not now. To do so would spell death. They had to get out of there alive, and for that to happen, he had to remain alert.

Karl spun to the right. Sean turned his back to the man and scanned the left side of the hallway.

"Empty," Karl said.

"Same here," Sean said.

"Where'd she go?"

"Hopefully she left." Sean meant it, too. He didn't want to have to pull the trigger and watch whatever faint trace of a soul remained in the woman fade from her sorrowful eyes.

"Let's go, Sean," Karl said.

Sean turned and caught up to the SEAL. Tactics were thrown out the window now. They were up against an enemy for which they had no protocol. Some of the zombies moved so damn fast that they'd be on top of them by the time one alerted the other. To get out of this alive, Sean knew that they'd have to shoot first, and forget about asking questions altogether. Still, every ten feet or so, he'd glance over his shoulder, finding it impossible to escape the feeling that they were being watched.

The lights flickered above them. Perhaps the power supply was nearing the end of its dwindling life. Or maybe one of the afflicted was sitting in an electrical room chewing through wires. Sean's hand went to his belt and grabbed hold of the butt of his flashlight. It provided little comfort to him to know that he'd only be able to see a small section of the area in front of him should the lights go out and fail to come back on.

The only noise in the hallway was the constant buzzing that had been prevalent everywhere, except in the command room. He began to wonder if it wasn't the lights, but rather the life that existed within the building that created the sound.

They slowed as they approached the end of the hallway.

Karl turned to Sean and said, "Let's take this real slow. I'll stay high, you go low. We round the corner together."

"Okay," Sean said, turning toward Karl and making eye contact with the man.

If he'd kept his eyes focused in front of him, he would have noticed the bloody hand that wrapped around the corner of the wall. Then it wouldn't have been as much of a surprise when patient zero, the woman on the other side of the control room glass, launched herself straight at him.

## Chapter 14

"Get your ass off of me," Turk yelled at the lifeless being whose jaw remained clenched around his arm. He fired again, disregarding his own safety, and landed a shot that severed the right side of the thing's mandible from its head. He pulled his arm up and through the grate, refusing to look at the damage to his forearm. Instead, he took a few steps back and resumed firing. It seemed that not all of the afflicted had the ability to run fast or jump high. Only a select few had that good fortune. The rest milled about and moved at the same speed as the zombies Turk had grown up watching in horror movies.

He stopped shooting for a moment and scanned the crowd below, taking note of the tortured, soulless faces that stared up at him. Their eyes were bright, but hollow. Their skin was pale, discolored. Some of them had serious wounds on their heads and torsos. Their deep and wide gashes were crusted over, and in some cases, looked to be infected.

"Maybe they are zombies," he muttered.

He'd have smiled if he weren't so tired. He turned at the waist and saw his men engaged in combat. Turk shook his head at the decision he had to make. Help them, or continue trying to thin the herd below. He walked the other side of the grate, being careful to stay back should another zombie jump up and reach through for his leg. Once at the other end, he knelt down and lowered his head in an effort to see as far across the room as he could.

Turk found the sight below far from encouraging. The entire room appeared to be packed with zombies. They stood shoulder to shoulder, their eyes fixed on the being in front of them. The zombies closest to the cell block stared at the men in the cages. For the most part, they seemed oblivious to the SEALs above them.

*We can't win this*, Turk thought. But he couldn't leave the men locked up. Maybe it was time to call in and ask for help. Get the Army to send as many men as they could to come down here and fight the creatures below. He shook his head, knowing they'd laugh him off if he mentioned the word *zombies*. Even if they did take him seriously, how long would it take another company of Rangers to get there? How long had the guys from Delta been in captivity? At least four days from what Turk recalled. Why wasn't he sure? Why couldn't he remember simple details about the mission?

"Turk!"

The scream cut through the stiff, stale air like a hot knife through flesh.

Turk looked up and saw that one of his guys was attacking the others. He called out. Steele turned at the waist. Brady and Bates were on the floor, injured, barely moving. Steele held Schmitt's lifeless body by the neck, a foot off the ground. It appeared that half of Schmitt's face had been ripped off.

Steele smiled. His eyes shone bright. He dropped Schmitt and hunched over.

Turk lifted his rifle and set his sights on Steele's forehead. However, before he squeezed the trigger, Steele lunged to the side and finished off Bates, whose final scream was cut short as Steele buried his face into the man's neck and tore through the flesh, crushing his larynx.

Turk readjusted his weapon, and then fired. The first two shots hit Steele in the side, knocking him over onto his back. The man scooted along the floor, using his elbows to prop himself up, until he reached the wall. He tried to get to his feet, but Turk didn't allow it. He squeezed the trigger one more time, sending a bullet into Steele's forehead. The man's body folded over itself and fell to the floor.

Bates lay still on the floor. Turk didn't have to kneel down and inspect him to know that the man was dead. He turned his attention to Brady, who dragged himself with one arm toward Turk. His left arm was severed above the elbow, and blood pumped out in rhythm with his heart, forming a dark red river in his wake. He stopped and pushed himself up so that his chest was off the ground. Turk did his best to prevent his disgust at the site of the mangled man from showing on his face. One of Brady's eyes was hanging from its socket, and his nose had been severed. Deep gashes lined his right cheek, and the wounds continued through both lips. Turk knew they were severe wounds, but they weren't grave. However, the amount of blood the man had lost, and would continue to lose from his severed arm, was. Turk had to apply a tourniquet if there was any hope of saving Brady's life.

Turk knelt down and started to turn the man over. However, when he saw the damage to Brady's abdomen, he stopped.

"Just stay still," Turk said. He laid Brady's head down to the floor, then stood up. He walked behind the man, stopped, and aimed his rifle at the back of the SEAL's head. "Forgive me," he said as he pulled the trigger and ended Brady's life.

He remained still for a moment, looking at the four men he'd served with. All of them had been with him for longer than three years. They'd ate together, trained together, killed together. Now, they'd died together, and he wondered if he'd soon join them.

For the first time, Turk noticed the intense pain in his arm. He flinched at the damage the zombie had inflicted. He laughed when he realized that his mocking them by calling them zombies had become prophetic. *Damn flesh eaters*. He determined that while the wound looked grisly, there wasn't enough constant blood loss to require a tourniquet. He'd worry about cleaning the wound if he escaped the building alive.

Turk grabbed the rifles and submachine guns from his fallen SEALs, then moved back to the grate. He stared down at the remaining members of Delta, trapped in their cages like lab rats. The men stared back with faces devoid of hope. Despite Turk's efforts, the room was packed full of those beings. There was no way he was getting the men out alive.

He slipped his pack off his back and set it on the floor. He reached inside and pulled out a pouch that held two small phones. The first one had no signal. He didn't expect it to considering it was a satellite phone. The cellular phone would be hit or miss, he figured, although cellular communications was not his specialty. He'd had a decent signal outside, so it was a matter of how strong the antenna was, and what the builders of the facility placed in the ground above him. As he waited for the phone to boot up, Turk glanced around the room and, for the first time, noticed a faint trace of light from the corner nearest him. He grabbed his bag, slung it over his shoulder and walked toward the glow.

The light came from a shaft that appeared as though it might reach the surface. The opening was too small to tell if it led into another room in the facility or outside, but it appeared to be the best place to attempt a call. The phone finished booting up and Turk saw that it had a signal. It was faint, but a signal nonetheless. He pressed



and held down the number five, sending a call to his CO. The man answered, and Turk began to relay everything that had happened, painting a vivid picture of the scene below him. He felt ridiculous using the word zombie over the phone, and was sure they would have him committed the moment he stepped foot on U.S. soil.

"Sir," Turk said. "I don't know how long those men down there have left. How soon can you get reinforcements here?"

"Stand by, Chief."

Turk clutched the phone and pressed it tight to his ear. He scanned the room, looking for any signs of movement. Everywhere he looked, he saw shadows dance across the floor and the walls. Upon closer inspection, he'd find nothing there. He wondered what the hell was wrong with him. Was it fear? He glanced at the wound on his arm and wondered if something worse than fear was causing his mind to play tricks on him.

"Get out," his CO said abruptly.

"Sir?"

"There are no reinforcements, Turk. They're going to carpet bomb the area. You've got an hour, hour-and-a-half max to get your men and get out of there."

"My men are dead," Turk said. "The guys from Delta, I can't get to them."

"Leave them then."

"You're gonna fucking murder them."

"It's not my call, Turk." The man paused. "Just go. Don't look back. This isn't on your conscience."

"Sir."

There was no response.

"Sir," Turk said again.

Still, no response.

He looked at the phone and saw that the call had been ended. He raised his arm, prepared to throw the phone, but decided against it. Instead, he crammed it into his pocket and walked past the grate on the floor. He lined the rifles along the wall, grabbed one, then walked back to the grate. The zombies on the floor beneath stared up at him. He looked past them and saw the seven men pressed against the back wall of a cell. He yelled out to them, and then began firing, picking off the afflicted beings below one at a time.

Three of the men in the cell began waving their arms, and Turk ceased fire.

"There's too many," one of them said.

"I don't care," Turk called back. "Can you open the cell?"

"No."

"Dammit." Turk lowered his weapon and wiped his brow. "Bombers are on the way. I gotta get this room cleared out."

"Oh shit," one of the men yelled. "They just broke through the main cell gate. They're gonna get to us soon."

Turk switched positions so he could see the entrance to the cell block. A line of zombies made their way through the outer hall within the cell block and stopped in front of the group of Deltas. They grabbed hold of the bars that line the cell and began shaking them. Turk knew that at some point the bars would give and crack at the joints. Turk took aim at the zombie at the head of the line. He started shooting. One by one, they went down until he had to stop to reload. That's when he heard the men shouting to get his attention.

"What?" Turk yelled.

The men yelled in unison, "Kill us!"

Turk shook his head in disbelief.

"Kill us," they repeated.

"Don't let them attack us, man," one called out. "You've seen what they do, right?"

Turk had seen what they could do. Ruiz's pain-filled eyes still haunted him. He saw them as if they were two feet in front of his face, dark and tortured.

"Kill us," the shouts continued, in unison, from below.

Turk scanned the area from all sides of the opening in the floor. There had to be a way to get them out. But the men were as far away from the stairwell door as they could be. There were hundreds of afflicted in between them and their escape, and now a horde of zombies lined up, a few feet from the men, like they were in line at a buffet. Soon enough, the doors to the restaurant would open, and the zombies would tear the men apart.

When his eyes fell back on the men, he saw that they'd turned their backs to him. They stood shoulder to shoulder, their arms wrapped around the backs of the men next to them. It wouldn't be murder, Turk told himself. They'd asked for it. Rather than die at the hands of the afflicted, they'd rather another soldier take them out. They wanted a clean death, a warrior's death, and Turk could give it to them. He had to. He'd want it for himself.

He dropped to one knee and took aim on the man in the middle. He took a second to ask God for forgiveness, and then he pulled the trigger. The bullet entered the man's skull from behind and his body slumped, but did not fall. The men on either side held him up. Turk paid no attention to the pink cloud that hovered in the air. Tears fell from his eyes as he selected another man at random. One by one, he laid the surviving men from Delta to rest, saving the men on the end for last.

After the last man fell, Turk stepped back, and then fell to his knees. He cursed himself for what he'd done and for what he'd have to do. Time was running out, and he had to escape before the bombers arrived.

He was about to rise to his feet when the door to the stairwell opened. Then, the buzzing that rose up through the grate was matched in intensity by the same sound, only from behind him.

## Chapter 15

Sean found himself on his back, pinned down by the woman who had lunged at him from around the corner. Her blond hair hung down and fell across his face. The flap of skin that had peeled away from her head hovered inches away from his. He was drawn to her piercing blue eyes, which seemed brighter than they had through the window. He struggled against her grasp, but could not move. Her strength was far superior to his. Another effect of the mutation, he figured.

Why hadn't she tried to kill him yet? She remained on top of him, her head tilted to the side and her mouth closed.

What happened to Karl? Had she gotten to him first and Sean hadn't noticed?

She opened her mouth and a thick and phlegmy sound escaped. Small pieces of dirt fell from her lips and teeth and landed on Sean's cheek and between his parted lips. He started to spit them out, but stopped when her eyes narrowed in response. She continued to produce the sounds until she managed to form two words.

"Help... me."

Her voice was ragged and deep and gravelly.

"What can I do?" Sean said.

"Help me," she repeated.

"How?" Sean said through clenched teeth.

She let go of his shoulders and scooted back so that her legs straddled his waist. She settled onto his lap. Her eyes dimmed, then grew brighter, and he thought he saw a sliver of remaining humanity within them.

"How?" he asked again.

She licked her lips, to no apparent effect, then said, "Kill... Kill me... Kill me."

Sean lifted his torso and propped himself on his elbows. He began to scoot backward. She lifted up to allow him space to free himself. He reached down and felt for his pistol. His knuckles grazed along the inside of her bare thigh. Her skin felt like ice, and the experience sent a shiver up his arm.

He held the M9 in his right hand, cupping it with his left to keep it steady. He extended the gun. His shaky hands prevented him from holding his side arm level.

The woman leaned forward, resting her forehead against the end of the pistol's muzzle. She looked beyond the barrel, into his eyes, and smiled at him. Her eyes were brighter than Sean had ever seen them. She reached her hands out and placed them against the backs of Sean's, wrapping her fingers into his palms. Her touch was gentle, even if it was freezing. Her lips twitched and she managed to speak one last time.

"Thank you."

She closed her eyes.

Sean did the same as he pulled the trigger.

He felt her body fall to the side and heard it hit the floor with a slight thud. He reached down and lifted her left leg and pushed it off of his lap. He scooted away from her body, taking note of how at peace she looked. She was no longer the tortured beast who wandered the hallways seeking death. He wondered how long the soul

could remain intact before being chased away. At what point did the human disappear, leaving only the zombie to inhabit the body?

"I thought for sure she was going to win."

Sean looked up and saw Karl seated against the wall across from him.

"I guess she did, in a way," Karl said.

"You sat there the whole time?" Sean stared at Karl in disbelief while shaking his head. "She could have killed me. Why didn't you do anything?"

Karl raised his arm, revealing a wide gash across his abdomen. His pants and the lower half of his shirt were soaked in blood. "She got me pretty good on her way to you. Don't know why. I'd have been happy to kill the bitch. Would have made much less of a production over it." He laughed, which caused his face to contort in pain.

Sean placed his pistol in his lap, then brought his hand to his cheeks, realizing too late that it was covered in the woman's blood. He used the sleeve of his left arm to wipe her remains from his face. He turned his head and gazed down the hall, past the control room, toward freedom. All he had to do was get up and start walking. If he encountered any zombies, he'd start firing. The important thing would be to keep moving. Besides, how many of them could there be on this level? He hadn't seen any patrolling the halls. They were either outside or on the floors below. The same place Turk and the rest of the SEAL team were.

Sean knew he couldn't leave. Not yet, at least. He had to find Turk.

Using the wall, Sean rose to his feet. "I'm going to look for Turk," he said to Karl. "You keep your eyes and ears open. If anyone but us approaches, you kill them. You got it, Karl?"

Karl nodded and whispered, "Yeah."

Sean thought about placing a bullet in Karl's head. After all, if Sean failed to locate Turk, Karl was as good as dead. Sean would be humane about killing the man. Those things wouldn't. In the end, he left the man alive. He started toward the corner and turned down the adjacent hallway.

Most of the lights were smashed out, leaving the hall dark and full of shadows. Shadows which seemed to dance around when Sean's eyes focused on another area. He wondered if the hall had been this dark when Turk and the others had come through, or had the woman or another zombie smashed all the lights out recently.

He tried not to think of what might be lurking in the darkened rooms he passed. His goal was to get to the next hallway then to the stairs. That's where he'd find Turk. He was sure of it. The stairs were the key to finding the remaining men and getting out of the building as a team.

*These things we do so that others may live.*

He picked up his pace as the light that flooded the hall from the adjacent corridor grew brighter. He had almost broken into a run when three afflicted beings stepped out from behind the wall, blocking his entrance to the corridor. Their eyes glowed bright, standing out amid their pale, shaded skin.

Sean stopped and reached for the MP7 strapped across his chest. He aimed and fired in a matter of seconds, sending three bullets flying, hitting one of the zombies in the face and forehead. It fell to the ground as the other two shuffled toward Sean.

Sean's initial panic began to fade. These weren't mutated in the same manner as those afflicted who could cross distances faster than any man. They were fifteen yards out and he felt as though he had plenty of time. He aimed at the one on the left, then squeezed the trigger. Three bullets launched in rapid succession. His aim had been

off though, and the bullets started at dead center and then rose up into its neck. The wounds were fatal, not immediately so, though. Sean took a step back, re-aimed, fired. This time the first bullet slammed into the creature's forehead and the other two hit near enough.

The final zombie shuffled closer, now ten yards out.

Sean aimed and took a deep breath.

Eight yards out. Plenty of distance. Plenty of time.

Sean exhaled.

Seven yards, then six.

Sean pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Five yards.

He squeezed the trigger, again.

Click. Nothing.

Four yards.

He let go of the MP7 and reached for his side arm. In his haste, he struggled to free the weapon from its holster.

Three yards, then two. With its outstretched arms, the zombie was no more than four feet away.

Sean freed his pistol and began firing wildly, hitting the afflicted being in its legs, then its torso and neck and head. It dropped to its knees, then fell forward, landing less than twelve inches from Sean's feet.

Sean bent over at the waist and dropped his face into his palms, searing his forehead against the scorching hot barrel of his M9. The pain of the burn helped him to focus. He steadied himself and placed his hands on his knees and took several deep breaths. He became aware of the fact that he did not have enough ammunition to continue. He'd have to double back and retrieve extra rounds from Karl, and maybe even get his M4 from the command room. Was there time, though? Sean straightened his body and turned at the waist to look down the dark corridor behind him.

His eyes were off the lifeless body in front of him for a few seconds, but that was all it took. In a flash, the zombie propelled itself up and forward, sinking its teeth into Sean's left leg, right above the knee.

## Chapter 16

Turk stayed low and moved into the shadows along the edge of the room. The moment his back touched the wall, he flattened himself against it. Five dark figures and five sets of bright eyes passed through the open doorway. They entered in a single file line, shuffling tight to one another. The one at the front of the line scanned the room, his eyes moving from the right to the left. His gaze passed by Turk, then stopped a second later. Those glowing eyes scanned the area around Turk, taking their time, but never stopping on him. The zombie's head swung to the right and it began shuffling along the outer perimeter of the room, toward the wall opposite Turk's position.

Turk lifted his foot, began sidestepping to his right, toward the doorway. If he could avoid having to discharge his weapon, he would. It would only take one of those damn *things* to reach him for it to all be over. There was no one else alive, which meant there was no one who could save him if he were attacked. Turk was no longer on the offensive. The name of the game had become survival.

He caught a glimpse of the remains of Ruiz and the other men. So many lives lost, and for no good reason. They should have been told what they were getting into instead of being fed a bullshit story. The anger rose inside of him like the bitter taste of bile in his throat. How could he face the families of the men who'd lost their lives under his command?

Turk noticed that the pain in his arm had intensified and traveled from his forearm to his shoulder. What if he had become infected from the bite? Screw it, he thought. Let him become infected. Then those in command would pay. Turk'd be their worst nightmare if he became a zombie.

From that point on, Turk alternated between looking at the door to the stairs, and the creatures on the wall opposite him. They didn't seem to notice that he was in the room. Or perhaps they didn't care. Whatever the reason, he decided not to wait around and find out. He knew there could be more of them waiting for him once he stepped into the stairwell. However, he'd deal with that if and when it was necessary.

As he approached the remaining bodies of his team, Turk stopped. He contemplated gathering something from each man to return to their families. He decided against it, though, realizing that anything they wore might contain traces of whatever it was that turned humans into the creatures that rattled the bowels of the facility. The thought crossed his mind again that he might be infected. And at that moment, he realized that he'd been feeling lightheaded and nauseous since he'd been bitten. He wondered if the sickness could be transferred through bodily fluids.

It didn't matter. Turk had decided he wouldn't die inside the facility. He'd rather stand on solid ground and let a five-hundred pound bomb finish him off while the sun shone on his ass, than to go down amid the foul stench that surrounded him.

He looked away from the room where the bodies of tortured souls and the bodies of his fellow SEALs lay. Turk stepped through the doorway, pulling it shut tight behind him, sealing off the stairwell. He clutched the MP7 in both hands, inched to his right to check the stairs that led down to the third floor. They were empty, save for the

smear blood that covered each step. Satisfied that there was no immediate threat, he started up the stairs.

As Turk approached the landing, he heard a scream from further up the stairwell. The scream was not one of the afflicted, though. It belonged to a human. He knew at that moment someone was still alive. Turk ran up the stairs, ignoring the pain in his arm that flared up with each jarring step.

He rounded the corner to the final set of stairs and froze in his tracks. At the top, on the landing stood one of them. It hunched over and stared down at him with menacing red eyes.

Turk attempted to aim, but before he could set his sights, the zombie leapt from the platform. Turk fired without aiming, spraying the air with three burst shots. The zombie's body flinched a few times, and Turk figured he landed a couple shots, but had no idea where. Not the head, he guessed by the way the creature began clawing at his face after it landed on top of him.

Turk's weapon had been knocked loose from his hands and he was unable to regain control of it. He reached up and grabbed the afflicted by its neck, holding his arms at full extension to keep the zombie's mouth as far away as possible. Thick strands of saliva dripped from its mouth and onto Turk's wrists and forearms. No matter how hard Turk squeezed, the zombie didn't seem to notice. It kept snapping away at the air, perhaps expecting that Turk's face would be within range at some point.

Turk let go with his right hand and let his arm fall. He rolled onto his left side and drew his right knee up, allowing him to reach the knife he had sheathed against his calf. The blade slipped out of its leather holster. Turk brought the knife up, adjusting it so that the blade faced the hostile being on top of him. With a quick and decisive movement, Turk whipped his arm toward his head, then swung it toward the zombie, driving the knife through its left eye, into its brain. The zombie went limp. Turk shoved it to the left, pushing and kicking to get the foul creature off of his body.

Turk rose and fired three rounds into the zombie's head, ensuring it had experienced an unpleasant second death.

He raced to the top of the stairs and stopped at the foot of the hallway. The screams were louder here, and he now knew for sure they belonged to a human. Turk ran down the corridor, turned left at the adjoining hall and raced to the end where it met with the main perimeter hallway. He peeked around the corner and saw a body on the floor, then another, and beyond that, two bodies that seemed to be joined together. He shone his light and saw that an afflicted was on top of Sean, and the PJ seemed to be losing the battle.

Turk squeezed the trigger of his MP7, firing the rounds into the ceiling in an effort to distract the zombie. It worked. The being rose up from Sean's body and faced Turk.

Turk shone his light and saw the being's face covered in blood. Turk's heart sunk as he feared for Sean's life. Without hesitation, he fired, hitting the zombie in the chest. He lined up his next shot and sent three bullets flying. The first shot was true, and the zombie fell.

Turk stepped over the dead being and knelt next to Sean. "Ryder," Turk said. "Talk to me."

"My leg," Ryder said.

Turk looked down and saw that Ryder's leg had been chewed to the bone, perhaps into it, right above the knee. He feared that the femoral artery had been severed and

that Ryder would bleed out. There was already a significant puddle of blood on the floor.

"Sean," Turk said. "Listen to me. I'm going to apply a tourniquet to your leg. Okay? You understand?"

Ryder opened his eyes and nodded, then he said, "What happened to your arm?"

"One of them bit me, too."

Ryder reached into his pocket and pulled out the syringe.

"What's that?" Turk said.

"Antidote," Ryder said. "Should be three doses. One for you, one for me, and one for Karl, if it's not too late."

Turk tried not to show any excitement over the fact that one of his men was still alive. He finished applying the tourniquet to Ryder's leg, then he grabbed the syringe and pulled the cap off. He stuck the needle into Sean's right thigh, and pressed the plunger, dispensing about a third of the liquid into the PJ. He pulled the syringe out, wiped it on a clean patch of his shirt, then stuck it in his own arm, being careful to use only half of the remaining liquid. He pulled it back out and capped it, then stuck it in his pocket.

"I don't think I can walk," Ryder said, offering a half-smile.

Turk figured most men displayed some kind of false bravado in situations like this. He was certain that Ryder had seen it time and again during his missions and now was giving Turk the same treatment.

"Don't worry," Turk said. "I got you. Just tell me if something comes at us from behind."

"I'll do better," Ryder said. "I'll shoot the bastards."

"Make sure you give me a warning," Turk said as he lifted Ryder off the ground and placed him over his shoulder. "I'd rather not go deaf in here."

Both men looked at each other and laughed.

Turk hustled down the hall, and then slowed as he approached the corner. There was no stealthy way to check around the corner without setting Sean down, and Turk didn't want to do that, as it might place the man at risk of going into shock. Turk stepped around with his weapon aimed in front of him. He saw Karl sitting on the floor, leaning back against the wall. Karl's eyes were closed and his head bent over. Turk couldn't tell if the man was dead or not.

"Karl," Turk said.

Karl said nothing, didn't move.

Turk stayed close to the opposite wall as he passed in front of Karl. He decided to address the man one more time.

"Karl? You okay?"

This time Karl nodded and opened his eyes. The glow they gave off was bright and intense. Turk also noticed how pale the man's skin had become.

"Ryder, you think this antidote works if they've turned already?"

"No," Sean said. "The doctor said that would be too late."

"What doctor?"

"The doctor in the control room—"

"Never mind," Turk said. "You tell me later. Okay, Sean? For now, watch your ears."

Turk lifted his gun and aimed it at Karl, or rather, the being that had once been Karl. He had to think of him in those terms in order to do what had to be done. With a deep breath and a heavy heart, Turk sent three bullets into his old teammate, then turned



and began running down the hall. He had no idea how long it had been since he spoke with his CO. He only knew that time was running out and it wouldn't be long before the bombs began to fall.

## Chapter 17

The final fifty feet might as well have been a mile. Lactic acid had built up in Turk's muscles and his legs burned. It took every bit of willpower he had to keep his knees pumping as he sprinted toward the tunnel that would lead them out of the facility. Getting Sean to this point had been easy, relatively speaking. Now he had to figure out how to get him to the surface while traveling through a space where neither of the men could stand up straight. He looked at Sean and performed a quick assessment of the PJ. He looked awful. He looked like a dead man. Turk wondered if Sean would be able to save a man in his condition. The thought of leaving Sean there to ensure his own safe escape crossed Turk's mind. But he couldn't do that. He'd already left so many behind, and adding one more would break him.

"You with me, Sean?" Turk said.

"Yeah," Sean said through gritted teeth.

"I'm gonna need you to do some of the work here. Okay?" He set Ryder down inside the bottom lip of the tunnel. "Can you drag yourself up?"

Sean strained and grunted and pushed himself onto his right knee. Then, with Turk's help, he stood on his right foot, letting his left leg trail behind. He shuffled around and screamed. However, the pain did not stop the man. He kept moving forward.

Turk climbed through the narrow opening, then rose to his feet in a hunched over position. He wrapped his left arm around Ryder, providing the man with extra support. He intended to help take some pressure off Ryder's decimated leg. The two men huddled together and began making their way up the angled tunnel. After twenty feet, the buzzing that had remained constant during their stay in the facility, faded away.

"Watch for zombies," Ryder said.

Turk smiled for a second or two when he realized that Sean had been calling the afflicted beings zombies as well. The moment of revelation passed, and he resumed feeling as though they were being followed by a horde of the creatures. Every fifteen seconds or so, he'd check over his shoulder to verify the tunnel was clear. He saw nothing each time he looked back. However, the feeling that the zombies were close by helped push Turk forward when all he wanted to do was collapse.

Turk thought back to when they entered the facility. How long had it taken them to travel through the tunnel? Was it three minutes? Five? Ten? How could something so recent feel like it had taken place so long ago? Why couldn't he remember a detail like that? However long it had taken, he was sure that the journey out was going to take three times as long with the injured man slowing him down. Once again, the thought of leaving Ryder behind crossed Turk's mind. But when he looked over at Sean and saw the determination on the man's pale face, he knew he had to keep pushing on with him. Then Sean went limp and nearly dragged both Turk and himself to the ground.

"Get up, Sean," Turk said.

"I can't do this, Turk," Ryder said. "Too much blood loss. Leave me."

"Dammit, Ryder, if you'd pulled this twenty seconds ago I'd have left your ass. But you're on my conscience now. You got that?"

Sean said nothing. His eyes fluttered back in his head.

"Get up, Sean," Turk said. "Come on. Stand up, then take one step, then another. You can do this. I want you to think about how, in a couple weeks, you and I are gonna hook up and have some drinks and all of this will be a memory. We'll laugh about it as we pound back a case."

Ryder released a primal scream as he pushed himself off the ground. It was a yell Turk was familiar with, having heard it weekly since his days in BUDs training. He helped Sean balance on his good leg, and then they resumed moving through the tunnel.

"Let's see if we can pick it up," Turk said. "I don't know how much longer we have."

"Till what?"

"They're bombing this place."

Turk assumed his words motivated Ryder, because the man began moving twice as fast, jumping forward with his good leg, screaming in pain when his left foot slammed into the ground. But to Turk, every cry meant they were closer to leaving the nightmare behind. They might make it out, after all.

The closer they got to the end of the tunnel, the wider it became, and it soon became possible for Turk to carry Ryder. It couldn't have come at a better time, too. Sean's head and torso were soaked in sweat, and his left leg covered in blood. Turk became concerned that the tourniquet had slipped. That would guarantee death for the PJ. If it had, there was nothing Turk could do, so he cast his doubts aside and pressed on.

"Stay with me, Sean."

"I'm right here, Turk."

They reached the end of the tunnel, and Turk fell to his knees, mostly in thanks, but partially due to exhaustion. But he knew the journey was not yet complete. They had to get out and they had to get away from the site before the bombs started falling from the sky. Turk eased Ryder to the ground, then got back on his feet. He stepped toward the door, placed his hand on the knob and spun it to the left until he heard a click.

"I'm gonna check it out first," Turk said.

Ryder nodded and said nothing as he glanced down toward his leg. Turk noticed a bemused look wash over Sean's face.

"What?" Turk said.

"I'm gonna lose my leg."

"I know. I'm sorry, man."

"Why did my last jump have to be at night?"

Turk forced a smile and placed his hand on Sean's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. Then he cracked the door and bright sunlight flooded the tunnel, setting his eyes on fire and killing his vision. He blinked a few times and shielded his eyes from the sun while they adjusted to the light. He almost wished they hadn't, because the sight before him gave him little hope for them escaping alive. He pushed the door shut, turned around and leaned back against it. He brought his palms to his face and rubbed his stubbled head.

"Think you can still shoot?" Turk asked.

"I can probably manage," Sean said, using the wall to help him stand up.

"Here." Turk handed Sean his MP7. "Anything approaches, squeeze the trigger." He handed him an extra magazine before turning back toward the door. "I don't care what it looks like, Sean. Kill it."

He half expected the fifty or so zombies he saw outside to rush toward the tunnel when he pushed the door open again. But they didn't. They didn't even seem to care that he and Sean were in the doorway. They all stood with their backs to the men, facing the rising sun. Their bodies were arched, their arms wide, and their faces turned up toward the sky. Turk wondered if the action was some sort of spiritual cleansing for the damned.

He took note of their positions, then he raised his rifle and aimed at the closest zombie.

"Don't," Ryder said.

"What?"

"Wait."

"Why?"

"Help me through the door." Ryder held out his right arm.

Turk reached over to support Sean as he limped through the doorway. "What are we doing, Ryder?"

"Listen."

Turk angled his head, but didn't hear anything. He shrugged and shook his head as he looked back at Sean.

"We need to move away from the door," Sean said.

"That's going to put us out in the open, closer to them."

"I know," Sean said. "Just do it."

Turk wrapped his left arm around Sean and helped him move away from the facility's entrance. They traveled ten feet, then Sean said, "Hear it?"

Turk squinted and angled his head while scanning the crowd of zombies who were still distracted by the morning sun and blue sky. Or were they in awe of it?

As if he had read Turk's thoughts, Sean said, "It's not the sun. It's the planes. They hear and feel them."

*Planes. Bombers.*

"Sean, we gotta get moving. Fast. Those are the bombers, and they're headed straight for us."

"The sound must resonate with them. Soothe their soul, so to speak," Ryder said.

"I don't care," Turk said. "As long as they don't care about us."

They moved away from the crowd of the afflicted that gathered between the entrance and the makeshift graveyard. Not a single one of them looked back at the two men.

"They don't even know we're here," Turk said.

"Maybe it's too bright," Sean said. "No shadows. I think they respond to our—"

"Whatever. We're making a break for it." Turk hoisted Sean up to a fireman's carry and began to head for the hill. The planes were close. He tossed a glance over his shoulder to see if he had visible contact with them yet. There was still no sign of them, other than the sound of their approach. Turk's eyes scanned the group of zombies one last time, then shifted to the graveyard. What he saw made him pause. "Jesus Christ. Sean, look."

"What?" Ryder said.

"The graveyard."

"Jesus."

A hand stuck out from the dirt, its fingers pointing straight up. Then an arm pushed through, even further out of the ground, almost to the shoulder. Another hand

emerged, followed by the top of a head, then eyes and a nose and, finally, a complete face. The same thing happened at a second grave, and then a third. Within seconds, half the dirt mounds had bodies pushing up through the disturbed earth. Perhaps the phrase zombies had been more accurate than Turk had realized.

"Move," Sean said.

Turk pushed harder and faster with every step, reaching the top of the hill in less time than they had taken to descend it the night before. They went over the ridge, and he set Sean down and reached for his satellite and cellular telephones. He turned to hand one to Sean, but the man had passed out. Turk pushed down a single number on each phone and waited for the first person to pick up. His CO answered. Turk explained that he and Ryder were out, but that Sean needed medical attention as soon as possible or he'd die. His CO told him to leave his satellite phone on. They had a team close by who would locate them through the phone's GPS chip, which acted like a beacon and provided Turk's location in case of an emergency. Then, he told him to get moving, because the bombers were only minutes away.

Turk lifted Sean over his shoulder, picked a line, and started running. He sprinted faster and harder and longer than he ever had in his life. He didn't dare stop. He didn't have to look over his shoulder to know that the bombers had arrived. The first explosion gave that away.

Turk yelled as each subsequent bomb screeched through the air and pummeled the ground with devastating impact. He felt the earth shake and ripple under his feet. How close would the bombs get to their position? Did the pilots know that two U.S. soldiers were on the ground? Would they make it out of this alive?

All the pain Turk felt, his burning lungs and aching legs and cramping muscles, none of it made a difference after the bomb landed too close to him and Sean. The initial impact did not affect them, but the subsequent blast wave did. The sudden burst of hot air traveling at over one hundred miles per hour knocked Turk off his feet, sending him through the air and jarring Sean loose from his grip.

Turk landed violently, first on the back of his head, then his spine. He bounced a few feet in the air and his body twisted and he was slammed onto his side. He skid five or ten feet before coming to a stop face down in the dirt. The last thing he saw before passing out was Sean's bloody leg landing five feet in front of him, sending a cloud of dust two feet into the air.

## Chapter 18

"Stay with us, Ryder."

Sean opened his eyes and saw two faces hovering over him. He figured out he was inside a helicopter by the thumping of the rotors and the whine of the turbine. But why was he there, lying on his back?

"We're gonna take care of you." He couldn't tell which of them said it. Their faces were dark and indistinguishable and contrasted sharply with the bright light behind their heads.

Sean barely heard the words, although he could tell the man was no more than eighteen inches away. If not for the constant thumping and whining created by the helicopter, he would have been concerned that he'd lost his hearing. He tried to turn his head to the left, but found himself unable to do so. Then he tried to lift his head, but couldn't. He'd been immobilized. His training had taught him there was one reason for that. He broke into a cold sweat. They were concerned about his neck. Why, though? Had he broken it? Had he not managed to deploy his reserve chute after his main failed to launch, and somehow he'd survived the impact, but had broken his neck?

Sean searched his mind in an effort to recall the last thing he saw before waking up in the chopper.

The sun blinded him. It exploded in front of him. But, was it the sun? He had been outside and there was a flash of light. His body was launched through the air ten or fifteen or twenty feet. He flew, his body twisting, turning, slamming into the ground. He landed on his back with tremendous force. Had he shattered his spine? No, that much he knew. He recalled moving, if only a bit, in an effort to check on Turk.

*Turk!*

What had happened to the SEAL?

"T-T-Turk," Sean said.

"Save your strength, Sergeant," one of the men said.

"Where's Turk?"

Neither man replied. They looked at one another without giving Sean's question the attention it deserved. He asked several more times. They continued to ignore him. He decided to wait before asking again. Someone had to know and that person would tell him. Until then, he had to focus on remaining awake so that he could stay alive. Sleep could mean shock. And, judging by the pain in his left leg, shock would mean death if the wound was as bad as he thought it was.

"Cold," Sean said.

"You've lost a lot of blood," the man said. "I've started a transfusion."

*Combat doc*, Sean thought. He didn't recognize the man, but his thoughts were jumbled and he didn't know if the two had worked together before or not.

"I'm going to level with you, Ryder," the man said. "I don't know if we're going to be able to save your leg. But it was heads up on your part applying the tourniquet to it. Saved your life, man. When you're better, you'll have to tell me how you managed to do that after stepping on an IED."

There was too much recognition in the way the man spoke to him. How did this man know Sean? He was certain he had never seen him before. What was he talking about, stepping on an IED? He'd been hit by a bomb. A bomb dropped by a U.S. plane. It wasn't the bomb that took his leg, it was a damn zombie.

"Zombie," Sean said.

The men looked down at him, their faces disappearing again as their heads blocked out the light.

"What?" one of them said.

"No IED," Sean said. "And it was Turk who saved me. I didn't have," he paused and forced himself to swallow, "I had no strength."

The men looked up and nodded at each other. One twisted at the waist and returned with a needle. He stuck it in Sean's shoulder and pressed on the plunger.

Sean felt fire blaze through his arm as the fluid coursed through his veins. Inch by inch, his body went numb, starting with his arm, then spreading across his chest and down his abdomen. The heat turned to cold, traveled up his neck, surrounded his head. His eyelids grew heavier with every blink he took as the agent penetrated his brain. Finally, his eyes shut and remained closed. The thumping of the rotor and the whine of the turbine were drowned out, and Sean went to sleep.

The quiet and still surprised Sean when he woke up. Had the shock and blood loss been too much? Was he dead? He tried to move his head and his hands and his feet. Pain flooded his body, confirming that he had not died. One nightmare had ended, and another one had begun. The nerves in his left leg were on fire, at least to a spot above his knee. Below that, he felt nothing. His lungs and chest ached with every breath he took, leading him to believe that he had multiple broken ribs. His head was no longer restrained, and he shook it slowly side-to-side. He tried to speak, but was unable to.

"Doctor," a female voice said with a Nigerian accent. "He's moving."

"Christ," a man with the same accent said. "Someone get the anesthetist in here. I thought they took care of this on the way here."

Sean forced his heavy eyelids open. He was greeted by a bright halo of light that washed out his vision. He made out shapes along his left and right, but could not see where he was.

"Sir," the man said. "My name is Doctor Adebayo. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we are in the process of amputating your leg. The men that brought you here explained to me that you are a highly trained medical technician in the United States Air Force. So what I'm about to tell you should make sense. We thought you were anesthetized prior to being delivered to us."

A memory struck Sean and he recalled one of the men in the helicopter injecting something into his arm. He'd passed out right afterward and, as far as he could tell, had been under until he woke up here. Perhaps the antidote that Turk had injected him with while they were still inside the facility had something to do with the anesthesia not working properly? He opened his mouth to say something to that effect, but the doctor continued.

"For some reason, you've come out of it. I've already removed the tourniquet and prepped your leg for amputation. I have to proceed at once, or we run the risk of your blood pressure elevating too high and remaining there, leading to you bleeding out or having a stroke on the table. If I don't begin now, you will die. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Sean took a moment to process the doctor's words. His leg was gone. He knew that before he escaped from the halls of that underground hell, where he thought he was going to die. He'd felt okay when he believed he'd end up dead. In some ways, he almost preferred to die rather than live his life with one leg. If not for the memories of his wife Kathy and daughter Emma, he might have struggled against the team of medical staff that surrounded him. But he had to leave alive. He had to be there for his family.

Warm tears flooded his eyes and fell down the sides of his face in a constant stream. A heavy leather strap was placed over his waist and cinched down, drawing him tight to the bed. Fingers brushed up against his palms and wrapped around his wrist. Hands pressed down against his shoulders, pinning him down. A woman leaned over him, blocking out the bright light that now silhouetted her. She forced a smile, but his pain was reflected in her eyes. Or was it pity that she showed him? She used one hand to pinch his face near the corners of his jaw, forcing his mouth open. She maintained her grip, then, with her free hand, inserted what Sean assumed was a bite stick.

They were going to begin the amputation without anesthesia.

"This is going to hurt worse than anything you've ever felt," the doctor said.

If he could have spoken, Sean would have offered an argument to the man. As far as he was concerned, nothing could be more painful than placing the barrel of your gun against your best friend's head and pulling the trigger. And, perhaps, this was Sean's penance for doing so.

The doctor continued. "We'll have you under anesthesia as soon as possible, but I cannot wait any longer to begin."

He started the bone saw, an oscillating saw equipped with a diamond tipped blade, emitting a high pitched *whirr*. Sean didn't lift his head, but he imagined that the saw was one of the larger models. He knew that hundreds of years ago amputations had been performed on the battlefield using manual saws. This thought left him feeling fortunate that his procedure would be over in a matter of a few minutes.

The doctor slipped out of the lower range of Sean's field of vision. Sean prepared himself for what was to come. He bit down on the rod between his teeth and squeezed the hands next to his at his side. He saw a pained look flash across one man's face. Then he saw disgust across the other man's face. The woman behind him stroked his hair with one hand as she held the straps affixed to each end of the bite stick with her other hand, keeping the rod firmly in place between Sean's teeth.

The diamond tipped blade met Sean's femur with a sickening screech. His body tried to jolt upward, but the leather belt and strong hands and arms kept him rooted to the operating table. His gargled screams drowned out the sound of the bone saw as it tore through the few remaining scraps of meat, muscle and tendons covering his femur. The saw worked in a single constant action, and the doctor maintained enough pressure to drive it downward, severing the thick bone in two.

The woman behind him and the man to his left separated, and an older woman appeared in between them. Her ashen, wrinkled skin told Sean that she'd been in the hospital for a number of years, and had probably seen worse injuries than his. But the look on her face told him that she'd never seen a man being put through an amputation while awake and aware. She spoke, but Sean didn't listen. If he could have talked at that moment, he would have told her that she was too late, but she was welcome to stick around for a bit. Mercifully, she inserted a needle into his neck,



presumably to speed up the process of the anesthesia shutting off the nerve center in his brain from the rest of his body.

The halo of light closed in above Sean. The dark faces shrunk and disappeared as the outer edges of his vision turned gray, then black. Starting with his hands and feet, his body became numb. A welcome relief as the sensation traveled through his legs. A moment before he lost all sensation, he thought that he felt a tiny prick in his left thigh. He wondered if she had injected another agent into his leg. Although, it could have been the bone saw.

The light faded out, as did the voices and sounds in the room. Sean entered a blackened space, where tall grasses swayed in a gentle breeze, brushing against his palm as he walked toward the images of his wife and daughter.

## Chapter 19

A week passed by in less than ten minutes for Sean. They kept him sedated for the most part, an effort to help with the initial healing of the amputated limb. If he was asleep, he wouldn't move. It also meant fewer pain medications, allowing his body to work as it needed to in order to heal the wound in as short a time as possible. His time awake was filled with doctors and nurses, an ambulance, and a plane.

He woke up in considerable pain and with no idea where he was. The room was quite different to the one he recalled being in the day before. He glanced to his right where a sliver of light sneaked into the room through an opening between heavy gray drapes. It took him a moment to realize that it was snowing outside. He knew he wasn't in southern Nigeria anymore. Had they transported him across the Atlantic? Was he in Walter Reed?

He looked to his left. Tears flooded his eyes at the two beautiful faces staring back at him. Through most of the ordeal inside the facility, Sean had been able to suppress his thoughts and feelings about his wife and daughter. Sean had always figured that thinking too much of his loved ones was a sure fire way to get himself killed. That's why he'd always kissed the picture of them before the start of a mission, and tucking the photo away put them out of his mind, at least until it was safe enough for him to think about them again.

"Kathy," Sean said. "Emma."

His wife stood and picked up their daughter, leaning her over Sean to give him a hug. Sean reached up with both arms, wrapping one around Emma, and the other around Kathy. For the first time in more than a week, he felt at peace. Then, he began to cry. He wept for Jules, and the SEAL team, and the tortured souls that were forever trapped in that underground lair of death.

Sean released his wife and child. Kathy set Emma on the chair and handed the little girl a coloring book. Then she turned back to Sean.

"I heard about Jules," she said.

Sean bit his lip and nodded. He wondered how much she knew and what he should tell her. Hell, what *could* he tell her? Truth was, he wasn't sure what had happened anymore. His dreams had been full of so many vivid and horrific events, the lines between reality and fantasy had become blurred.

Kathy saved him from having to make the decision. "Let's talk about that later, Sean," she said, gripping his shoulder and squeezing gently.

Sean brought his palms to his face and wiped away his tears, feeling for the first time the growth of hair on his cheeks. He nodded at Kathy, and then looked at the equipment above him. It was then that he realized he was not at Walter Reed. The equipment labels were written in another language and he realized he was in Europe.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Germany," Kathy replied.

He thought for a minute. There were several U.S. Air Force bases in Germany. He figured they would have taken him to the largest.

"Frankfurt?" he said.

"No," she said. "Near Munich."

"Erding?" he said, referring to the Air Force base about half an hour north of Munich.

"No, it's a private place, Sean. You are here to see Doctor Kaufmann."

"Who's that?"

She shrugged. The gesture led Sean to believe she'd only remained a little more informed than himself. "He's a leader in prosthetics. They used the word *pioneer*. That's all I know. The Air Force set all this up. They promised me they're going to take care of you." She hesitated, then added, "Take care of us."

"How's that?"

"They'll be in to talk to you. They asked me to let them tell you."

Sean shrugged, then slid his hand under the sheets toward his left thigh. He felt the bandaged stump that signified where his leg had been severed. He scratched at the bandages that covered the closed wound around his femur. He wanted to pull back the sheets and inspect it, but didn't out of fear of frightening his wife and daughter.

"How's it feel?" Kathy asked.

"Hurts," Sean replied. "Are you going to be okay with this?" he added.

She lifted her shoulders and inched and forced a smile. "I'll be there for you no matter what, Babe."

Sean hoped she'd meant it, because he knew he'd need her now more than ever. Recovering from the wound was one thing. Recovering mentally from the things he had encountered in Nigeria was another. He knew that at some point he'd need to tell someone, and he knew that someone would likely be her. He was concerned that the things he had to tell her might be enough to make her run away from him.

"It's close to Emma's nap time," Kathy said. "We've been here all morning waiting for you to wake up."

"Sorry it took so long," Sean said with a smile.

"You snore, Daddy," Emma said without looking up from her coloring book.

Sean laughed, perhaps for the first time since Jules had been attacked that night in Nigeria.

"We're staying across the street," Kathy said. "They put us up in an apartment there. We have it for a month, although they told us they doubt we'll be here that long."

"Okay," Sean said, deciding not to ask who *they* were.

"We'll be back around eight in the morning to join you for breakfast."

He didn't want them to leave, but he also knew that it had to be tough for Emma to see her daddy laid up in bed, unable to move. He had no idea what his face looked like, if it were covered in cuts, scrapes and bruises. He wasn't sure if his daughter knew that his leg had been taken. If she did, then he figured the question on her mind was "how" and sooner or later she'd ask. He knew that he wasn't comfortable enough to answer that question.

"Okay," he managed, forcing a smile to linger on his face until his wife and daughter had left the room and were out of sight. A wave of calm washed over him. Despite all that had happened and everything he'd lost physically, mentally and spiritually, he still had his family. He knew that there were soldiers he served alongside whose families no longer had them.

He realized that he hadn't had solid food since before he entered the facility in Nigeria with Jules, Turk and the rest of SEAL Team 8. His stomach turned and ached

at the thought of eating, and he hoped that the hospital would provide him with an early dinner.

It took an hour and a half before a nurse came by with his meal. The food they provided held little appeal for Sean, but he ate it anyway. He needed strength and now was as good a time as any to begin rebuilding it. Before he finished with his meal, there was a knock on his door. He had been expecting the doctor, so receiving a visitor at the late hour was of little surprise.

However, the four men who entered his room were unexpected.

## Chapter 20

The first man through the door was tall and lean. He appeared to be around fifty. His receding hair was half-black, half-gray, and he was dressed casually. In fact, they all were. The other men were young, though. They looked to be around the same age as Sean. He didn't recognize any of them, but figured them to be military, or worse, CIA. The facility in Nigeria was the kind of place the Agency would know about and want to keep tabs on. That would explain why they'd come to see Sean. They wanted to extract whatever information he had.

"Staff Sergeant Ryder?" the older man said.

Sean stared at the man, but did not reply.

"Are you Staff Sergeant Sean Ryder?" the man asked again.

"Yeah," Sean replied. "Who're you?"

The man turned toward the others, and then motioned with his hand. One guy left the room, pulling the door closed behind him. The remaining two men stood by the door, one on either side with their hands crossed in front of their waists. Sean noticed the tell-tale bulge on their right hips, indicating they were armed. And, he presumed, dangerous.

"Who are you?" Sean asked again.

"My name is Kemp," the man said. "That's all you need to know. These other men are here to make sure you and I are left alone while we talk."

"That's funny," Sean said. "I would've assumed they were here to make sure that I talked."

Kemp nodded and offered a curt smile. "I understand your apprehension, Sean. You've been through a lot these last few days. I'm here to help, not hurt. Work with me and everything will be taken care of for you. Understand?"

"Who do you work for? Are you with the Air Force? The Navy?"

Kemp smiled, and said, "That's not important, Sean. What is important is that we discuss what happened in Nigeria."

Sean felt his skin flush and a thin layer of sweat formed on his brow. "What do you know about it?"

"You went there on a support mission," Kemp said. "The Army lost a company of Rangers, and a handful of operatives from Delta Force."

Sean nodded.

"You and your partner, Staff Sergeant Julian Hoover, were set to rendezvous with members of SEAL Team 8. But the last contact from them stated that you and Hoover never arrived. They figured that you two were—"

"Wait," Sean said. "What?"

"They figured you two were blown off course," Kemp continued, seemingly annoyed by Sean's interruption. "They backtracked to where they estimated you should have landed, but there was no sign of either of you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. We were a little behind them, but not by much. It took us maybe a half-hour to reach them."

Kemp furrowed his brow and tilted his head to the side. "No, Sean, you never reached them. You don't remember what happened after you landed?"

"Of course I do," Sean said. "How could I forget it? We encountered..." Sean paused, trying to think of a word other than zombie. "A humanoid being attacked Jules and me. We killed it. Then we hustled and found Turk and the rest of—"

"You stepped on an IED, Sean. We determined the spot where you landed, which was damn close to a terrorist training camp by the way. From there, you set off to the south, but you didn't make it a quarter-mile before you stepped on the explosive."

Sean shook his head furiously. "That's not what happened."

"Are you sure?" Kemp leaned in close to Sean and gestured toward his shortened left leg. "You were the lucky one here. Hoover took shrapnel to the head and died instantly."

Sean continued to shake his head. "That's not true. We met up with the SEALs. Ask Turk. As far as I know he's still a—"

"Who is Turk? By my count, you've mentioned him twice now. I've never heard that name before."

"Charles Turksen," Sean said. "He led the SEAL team."

Kemp's lower lip protruded, he shrugged. "I don't know of a SEAL by that name, Sean." He pulled out his cell phone and flipped it open. He stuck his fingertip on the number pad and held a button down for a few seconds, and then he lifted the phone to his head. After a moment, he said, "Yeah, this is Kemp. Tell me, do you have any information on a Charles Turksen, USN, SEAL, maybe goes by Turk?" Kemp looked at Sean and faked a smile. "Yeah, I'm here with him now. He states that they rendezvoused with the SEAL team, and met with this Turksen. Says he was in charge." Another pause. "Okay, yeah, sounds good. I'll be waiting for your call."

Sean waited while the man folded his phone and placed it in his back pocket.

"They're going to dig a little deeper," Kemp said. "But his initial search had no records of any Turk or Turksen."

Sean started to rattle off the names of the other men who had perished.

Kemp nodded. "Yes, those men are dead, Sean. They were ambushed almost immediately after they set up camp for the night. Had you not stepped on that explosive, they would have killed you as well. Although, some might argue that they were alerted to the SEAL team's presence when you stepped on the IED."

"I don't know who you are," Sean said. "But you need to listen to me. I didn't step on any damn explosive. Those men weren't ambushed after they landed. We stayed on the ground for almost twenty-four hours, and then we entered a facility. They were doing biological testing down there and there were," Sean looked at the men behind Kemp, then lowered his voice, "mutated humans in there. Vicious, mindless killers. Those *things*, zombies we called them, they killed the men. One of them attacked my leg. That's how I lost it. It wasn't a damn IED."

Kemp frowned as he tilted his head. He looked at Sean with soft eyes, perhaps pitying him. "Are you sure that really happened, Sean? I mean, do you hear yourself? Zombies?" He laughed.

"Yes, I know exactly what happened, and I know what I saw in that hell hole."

"You've been unconscious for more than a week, and under quite a heavy sedative. The stuff they gave you has been known to help a man to reach into the deepest recesses of his imagination, and pull out of it some pretty dark and crazy things. Disturbing dreams are most often reported. So are hallucinations. I've read stories much like the one you recounted, although aliens or demons are the most common vision. In fact—" Kemp's ringing phone interrupted him. "I'm sorry. Let me grab this."

Kemp backed away from the bed and answered his phone. "Didn't find any record of him, eh? I didn't think you would. That's the kind of name I'd remember."

Sean leaned back until his pillow enveloped him. What was going on? None of it made sense. His mind swam in doubt as he tried to recall what had really happened in Nigeria. His own vision seemed so real and accurate. However, he could picture Kemp's version with clarity. Logically, which made more sense? That he'd lost his leg due to a zombie bite, or an explosive? Could he be one hundred percent positive that he had in fact met up with the SEALs? That first encounter with one of the zombies, not thirty minutes after landing, seemed like something out of a sci-fi movie. Things like that don't happen. It made sense that he'd dreamt it. He'd heard of that kind of thing happening before to people under sedative and heavy pain killers, both of which had been in his system. Morphine dreams, he'd heard the phenomenon called. Men would recall vivid encounters with everything from women to aliens to sea creatures. Zombies were within the realm of possibility when they were imagined.

"Like I said, Sean, there is no record of a Charles Turksen ever serving in the U.S. Navy. And most certainly not as a SEAL."

Sean nodded, though he didn't know what to believe at that point. "I," he paused a beat, "I don't know what happened."

Kemp placed his hand on Sean's shoulder. "It's okay, Sean. You've been through a traumatic event. The kind that can cause a man to doubt many things in his life."

Kemp straightened, his face became solemn again. "Someone will be by your home when you get settled back in the U.S. They'll show you photographs of the area. In part to see what you might remember. You know, little details that might come back over time. They'll also show you where you were found, your condition, and what happened after you were rescued. If you wish to see it, that is."

"Okay," Sean said.

"You are a lucky man, Sean. You're the only one that survived. Someone, or something was on your side that night."

He doubted it. "Anything else?"

Kemp looked over his shoulder and nodded. The man on the right side of the door stepped forward and handed him a folder. Kemp opened it and laid it on Sean's lap.

"What's this?"

"Discharge papers and information on how your settlement will work, future benefits, things like that. The government is going to take care of you, Sean. In a few days you'll have enough money in your bank account that you'll never have to worry about bills, and college for your daughter, and all of the other little financial stresses ever again. You'll also continue to receive a check in the amount of your current pay, plus full benefits for you and your family, for life. And the prosthetic procedure is on the government as well." Kemp turned and started toward the door. He stopped and spun around. "There's a number on the last page in that folder, Sean. If you're ever unsure about what happened, or you think you're going to discuss those crazy dreams, you call that number and speak to the man who answers. He'll be able to help you."

Sean flipped to the last page in the folder and saw a ten digit number scribbled on a piece of yellow legal paper. There was no name or anything else written on the page, only the number. "Who'll answer?" he asked without looking up.

There was no reply.

Sean lifted his eyes and scanned the room. The men had left, the room was empty. He leaned back into his pillow and allowed his mind to replay events that he thought had happened in Nigeria. Each time he watched a scene play out, it seemed more surreal than it previously had. He accepted the fact that Kemp had been right. The events took place in his head, not real life. He needed that to be the truth.

Sean looked over at the half empty tray of food next to his bed. His stomach growled in response, but he didn't have the desire to eat at that moment. Instead, he closed his eyes and decided to get some sleep. It was not to happen, though.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Mr. Ryder? I hope I'm not disturbing."



## Chapter 21

"I'm Dr. Kaufmann," the bearded man said with a thick German accent. He approached Sean's bed and extended his hand. Sean took it while he studied the weathered face in front of him. The doctor's hair was white with a few speckles of black. His blue eyes stood out against his red nose and cheeks. "I'm going to give you a new leg, Sean. A leg, which while it'll be made from titanium, will organically bond with your femur bone. You, like almost all of my patients, will find that you have feeling and sensation in your artificial limb."

Sean raised a curious eyebrow, which was met with a smile by the doctor.

"I know," Kaufmann said. "It sounds crazy."

"You have no idea," Sean said, smiling.

"This discovery was quite the shock to us all when my first patient recounted being able to feel the ground beneath a foot that had been dust for over twenty years. What I do, well, it's called an osseointegrated titanium implant. The short of it is that there will be direct contact between the titanium implant and the bone. You can look at it like I fuse them together, and then the bone bonds with the titanium, sort of growing into it. The long of it—"

"I don't want to know the long of it, Doc."

"Fair enough," Dr. Kaufmann said. Sean presumed the disappointed look on the man's face was because he wouldn't get to share the science behind the procedure. "Basically, the attached implant will end where your knee had existed. You'll have two titanium leg attachments that will connect with the permanent prosthesis, forming a joint. One will give you a full range of movement and will be better for everyday activities. The other is specially designed for running. Despite the prosthesis being in two pieces, most of my patients say they can feel their entire leg, and even the sensation of stepping on the ground. They feel the soles of their feet and can even replicate the feeling of wiggling their toes. Some can feel cold and hot through their new legs. Best of all, no one will be able to tell you have a prosthetic leg if you are wearing long pants. You might have a slight limp, but surely nothing that says, *hey this guy has a fake leg.*"

There was something about the doctor that led Sean to feel like he could trust the man. Perhaps it was his smile, or maybe his jovial face. Regardless, Sean knew that he'd let the man operate on him. "When can you perform the surgery?"

"I inspected your leg this morning, and it looks like we can get to it immediately. The freshness of the wound makes a few things easier, and a few things more difficult. In the end, it will play no role in your rehabilitation."

"What about the rehab?" Sean asked.

"You'll be here about four weeks, Sean. One for rest, three for rehabilitation, then you'll be on your way home. Any other questions?"

Sean shook his head and said nothing.

"Very well, then. The nurses will be in early to prep you. The next time you see me, you'll have a brand new leg."

Sean hadn't gotten used to the idea of having no leg yet, so having a brand new one seemed more exciting to the doctor than to himself. He smiled anyway and

thanked the man.

Sleep came fast, thanks to the drugs the nurse gave him after Dr. Kaufmann left. He was restless though, as visions of the facility in Nigeria plagued him, both in his sleep and the waking states in between. What was truth and what was fiction? The lines were blurred. The problem was that he could see the events with such clarity. The eyes of the woman in the hall hovered above him, staring down at him with that pleading gaze, begging him to put an end to her misery. Nonsense, he told himself. Those visions were the things of science fiction and there was no way any of that had happened. He had to accept the account provided by Kemp. There was no other logical explanation. Except when it came to Turk. He'd known Turk almost as long as he'd been a PJ. They'd served side by side on several rescue and recovery missions. Dreams could not have provided him with so many past memories.

Could they?

Two nurses entered the room at six a.m. He was wide awake and greeted them with a smile. They wheeled Sean into a room for surgery prep where he was given a brief explanation of what would happen throughout the day. He paid little attention to them, feeling that he knew all he needed to know. He was getting a new leg, plain and simple.

They anesthetized him prior to taking him to the operating room. Moments before fading into a deep sleep, Sean wondered if they'd told his wife that he wouldn't be joining her for breakfast.

When Sean came to, his leg hurt like hell. Almost as bad as having his femur sawed through. He grimaced and blinked his eyes open. It took several attempts to clear his vision. He heard voices in the room. They started off sounding muffled, like he was underwater and someone was trying to talk to him. After a moment, his ears cleared and he made out the sound of his wife talking to someone with a German accent. Sean turned his head. His wife and daughter were on one side of the bed, Dr. Kaufmann on the other.

"Welcome back, Sean," Kaufmann said. "I was telling your wife how successful the surgery was."

Sean's throat felt dry and scratchy, he nodded his response.

"You'll need to rest for a week," Kaufmann said. "Then we'll begin your rehabilitation."

A week turned into two, which turned into a month. Before he knew it, Sean was back home with Kathy and Emma. Together, they settled into a life that held little resemblance to the life he'd led as a PJ.

## Chapter 22

Sean swung his legs over the edge of his bed and reached down with his hand until he found his everyday use titanium prosthetic foot and leg. His eyes scanned his nightstand and settled in on his digital alarm clock. Eleven a.m. "Christ," he muttered, as he attached his prosthesis to the permanent titanium rod that had bonded with his femur years earlier. He still remarked that what the doctor had told him all those years ago had come true. He had almost all of the same sensations with his titanium leg as the one made of flesh and bone that he had lost in Nigeria. He could even feel the ground beneath his feet, and could tell when he moved from soft to hard ground. A cold tile floor could send chills up his leg and throughout his entire body. A walk through hot sand registered with both his left foot and right foot equally, and he'd find himself scurrying to get to a spot where the beach was damp.

The first year home had been rough. Sean missed the action and excitement of his job, as well as the camaraderie he shared with his fellow PJs and other members of the Special Forces community. But that had been the easy part to manage.

The nightmares that centered on the facility and the distraught beings inside persisted five to six nights a week. Sean slept very little during that first year, and he became so belligerent that Kathy threatened to take Emma and leave. That prompted him to dial the number on the otherwise blank yellow paper he'd received in the German hospital, stuck in the back of his retirement folder. He had no idea who the man was that answered, only that he helped Sean in a way that he imagined no counselor could. He told the man everything he remembered about the facility. Over time, the nightmares subsided, until he had them once or twice a month at most. These days, the dreams occurred less often, and Sean had almost accepted as fact that he'd stepped on an IED.

But doubts had lingered. Enough so that Sean devoted a portion of the money the government had given him to building a twelve hundred square foot bunker under the house they bought in the mountains of southeastern Virginia, south of Roanoke, fifteen miles or so east of I-81.

He and Kathy had fought over moving at first. They had a home and friends in Virginia Beach. She had a life there. But Sean's life there was dead. All he saw were memories of Jules. No matter how convincing they'd been in telling him that Jules death had been a result of an explosion, Sean could never shake a recurring vision of him aiming a gun at Jules and pulling the trigger.

Kathy agreed to move, and they settled into their new environment. She found work in the city, and Sean caught on as a volunteer with the Fire Department. Two or three days a week he would hang out at the firehouse and help clean the trucks, store gear and help with general repairs. When there was a call, he'd ride with the firefighters and assist in various ways depending on the situation. His training as a PJ prepared him for almost anything, and they found him an asset to have around.

Sean made his way down the stairs and into the kitchen. He poured a cup of warm coffee and scrambled a few eggs for breakfast. Before he could sit down to eat, his cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen and saw that it was Kathy calling.

"Hey, Babe," Sean said. "How's Seattle?"

"I got a line-up of conferences you wouldn't believe," she said.

"You're probably right," he said, hoping that she wouldn't go into detail.

Kathy laughed. "Did Emma get off to school okay?"

Sean glanced toward the front door and saw that his daughter's backpack was not hanging from its hook. He didn't want to admit that he had slept past his alarm and missed his daughter leaving for the bus. "Yeah, she's at school."

"Okay. Well, three days then I'm back home. Think you can handle it?"

"The fridge is stocked with frozen dinners," Sean said. "I think we're good."

"You sure? I could always get Barb to come over and make a meal for you."

Barb was short for Barbara Whaley, Kathy's best friend. The woman was single and forty and attractive. She spent most weekend nights at Sean's house, hanging out with him and his wife.

"Nah," Sean said. "I don't want to be a hassle. We'll be okay."

They finished their conversation then Sean returned to his breakfast, deciding to move into the living room so he could watch TV. He flipped through the local channels with the sound muted. It didn't take him long to realize that something had happened. Every station was broadcasting a news report thirty minutes too early. He set his fork on the plate of half-eaten eggs and got up as he unmuted the television.

"Officials are saying that the pandemic is confined at this time. There have been no reports in the U.S. as of yet," the woman said. "Travel to and from the following regions has been restricted." The reporter went on to list most of Africa, the Middle East and western Asia. The picture changed to still images of sick people in third world countries. "Signs include flu like symptoms: fever, aches and pains, chills, hot flashes, nausea," the list went on and Sean knew every symptom before the woman said it.

Sean rubbed his eyes, not sure he was really seeing what was being shown on TV. He hustled to the kitchen and grabbed his cell phone. He pulled up Kathy's number and was about to call her when the reporter said something that caught his eye.

"We're getting a report from Tangier, Morocco, of..." The reporter's face went white. "I... Cut to the tape."

A live feed took over the screen. It blinked and froze every few seconds like it was being broadcast via cell phone or webcam. Despite the bad feed, Sean made out the bodies of the afflicted as they shuffled through the dirty city street. At times, four or five of them would converge on someone too stupid to stay out of their way. They'd tear the person apart, limb by limb, and feast on the body.

Sean's phone rang. He muted the TV and answered without looking at the caller ID.

"Babe," he said. "You watching this?"

"I'm not your babe."

He recognized the voice. It was dark and deep and commanding.

"But I take it you're watching the same thing I am."

"Yeah," Sean said. "Who is this?"

"You know who this is."

"I know it sounds a lot like someone I was told didn't exist." Sean rose. "And if that someone did exist, and they stayed away from me for eight years while I fought daily to convince myself that I wasn't fucking insane, well, then that someone better stay far away from me. I may be missing a leg, but I can still kick anyone's ass. I'm stocked with weapons and have no reservations about using them."

"Good, you're going to need to." There was a pause. The man continued. "I'm sorry about that, Sean. They told me that if I reached out to you, they'd take my family. After

twenty years as a SEAL, they had a lot on me. What was I to do? Look, Ryder, that shit we saw was real. I knew it was only a matter of time before those *things* made it far enough for it to turn into a pandemic. Now it's happened. That's why I'm reaching out to you. Do you hear me, Sean? The friggin' apocalypse is here."

Sean fell onto his couch. Could this really be happening?

"You there, Ryder?"

"Where are you, Turk?"

"Near Charleston, South Carolina. I got a set up here, a bunker and a compound. It's all heavily fortified. I got a select group of people that will be staying here. Some family, a couple guys from the old SEAL team and their families. I want you to come out here. Bring your family. The way I see it, we've got about twelve hours before breakouts start happening in the U.S. That's when all hell will break loose."

Sean felt his head spin. Two versions of reality competed for space in his brain. The nightmares and images that he'd fought so hard to repress were now the truth that he had to accept and recall in frightening detail. But first he had to organize his family and his things if they were going to make it to Charleston in time.

"Where are you, Sean?" Turk asked.

"Near Roanoke, Virginia."

"So about six hours. You need to get moving now. Roads are going to start getting clogged as word of this gets out."

"Kathy's across the country. She's in Seattle. I can't leave without her."

"Shit," Turk said. "See if you can get her on a plane to Charleston. I can have someone meet her at the airport and bring her here. Will that work?"

"Yeah," Sean said.

"Okay." Turk gave Sean coordinates to the location of the compound. "And look, Sean, if things go south, you go underground and you stay there for at least three weeks. That's the minimum. You got somewhere you can go?"

"Yeah, I built a place here on my land. It's stocked. We can survive there for months." He walked to the window and parted the blinds with this thumb and forefinger. "Turk, why three weeks?"

"I figure that's about the global lifespan of this virus. After that it blows itself out. But, as you probably remember, it can be transferred through bodily fluids. So once you come out, you be careful."

"How do you know this?"

"The tunnel."

"Say again?"

"When I was helping you out of that hell hole, we had to go through this long ass tunnel. I kept you talking. You told me everything some scientist named Knapp told you."

"Knapp," Sean repeated. It started to come back to him.

"I got other people to call, Sean. You're the first one I reached out to. Get moving."

"Okay," Sean said.

He hung up the phone, rose, opened the front door, grabbed his keys and walked out to his truck.

By the time he reached his daughter's school, the parking lot was full of concerned parents. He hopped the curb and parked in the grass, making sure to leave himself a way out should others do the same.

He pulled out his cell and dialed Kathy's number. The call went to voicemail.

"Hey, Babe," he said. "I know you're in a meeting now, but once you get this message I want you to head straight to the airport and get on a plane to Charleston, South Carolina, okay? Don't come home. Don't wait for anyone. Don't tell anyone what you're doing. Don't even go back to your hotel. Straight to the airport, Kathy. Call me as soon as you have your flight information."

He hung up and stuffed the phone in his pocket. He worried that the tone of his message might frighten his wife, and wondered if he should call her back and leave a more reassuring message for her.

"Dad," he heard Emma yelling.

He scanned the mass of people crowded around the school's entrance and saw his daughter heading toward him. Sean rounded the front of his truck and opened the passenger door for her.

As he ushered her in, she asked, "What's going on, Dad?"

Sean slammed her door, cut across the front of the truck and hopped in behind the wheel.

"Dad?"

He turned his head and looked his daughter in the eye. He reached for her hand, held it firmly in his.

"The apocalypse."

Affliction Z continues in Book 2, *Abandoned Hope*, available now ([link below](#)).

Sign up for L.T. Ryan's *Affliction Z* new release newsletter and be the first to find out when the next story is published.

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## Author's Note and About Affliction Z

Thank you for reading my book, Affliction Z: Patient Zero. I hope you enjoyed the story and are excited for Book 2! Here's a little of what you can expect...

I currently have four books planned in the Affliction Z series. That could be expanded depending on how the events of each novel unfold. Patient Zero (book 1) was originally not intended to be its own novel. It was supposed to be roughly 50 pages, but grew to four times that amount. As I got into the story, the events unfolded in such a way that it became apparent that it deserved to be its own book in the series.

In addition to the series, I have a stand-alone novel that takes place in the Affliction Z post-apocalyptic world. I'll also be releasing short stories and novellas based on the events in the series. These shorter works will be based on secondary characters and events that may or may not be mentioned in the series books. The first shorter work will be titled, The Sickness of Ronald Winters. I do plan on offering it as a free download for newsletter subscribers, so make sure you sign up by visiting the link above.

The current plan is for the books to be released in the following order:

Affliction Z: Patient Zero (book 1) - March, 2013

Affliction Z: BOOK 2

The Sickness of Ronald Winters

Affliction Z: BOOK 3 - Winter, 2014

Affliction Z: BOOK 4 - TBD

Affliction Z: BOOK 4 - TBD

Stand-Alone Novel - TBD

I also write an Action/Suspense Thriller series based on a character named Jack Noble. If you enjoy characters like Jason Bourne, Jack Bauer, Jack Reacher, etc., then have a look at the books below.

Lee "L.T." Ryan

## Other Books by L.T. Ryan

### [Noble Intentions: Season One](#)

Jack Noble. Assassin for hire. Spy. Thief. He makes no mistakes. Passes no judgement. Feels no remorse. So why does he stop to help a lost child moments before he's supposed to complete a deal with one of the east coast's top crime bosses?

A simple decision that places Jack in unfamiliar territory. He's become the hunted and finds himself in a race against time to save those closest to him.

Noble Intentions: Season One is a fast-paced, thrilling and suspenseful story of underworld crime and government secrets.

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All Jack wanted was to finish his enlistment and move on with his life. All he did was intervene and save a family from unwarranted violence at the hands of four CIA agents. But he soon discovers that he did far more than intervene. He has placed himself dead square in the middle of a conspiracy that reaches the highest levels of the U.S. government.

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Reversion: The Inevitable Horror  
(The Portal Arcane Series - Book I)  
Fourth Edition

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For those who seek redemption, may you find it.

*The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.*

-Albert Einstein, 1931

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## Chapter 1

Samuel pushed the twisted sheet from his shoulder and let the makeshift noose coil on the ground like a dead snake. He stepped out of the rope and looked up at the decaying branch overhead, shaking his head. His eyes darted about the empty forest as his heart raced.

He drew a breath, wincing at the pain in his throat as his lungs tried to pull in more oxygen. He smiled at the joy of being alive until the memory of his prison cell surfaced. Like a leaf at the mercy of the wind, the image of the bars floated from Samuel's reach. Worry rushed back in as he struggled to find a connection, a reason for being here.

He stepped over the jagged rocks and closed his eyes. Silence. It could have been midsummer. It could have been the dead of winter. He could no longer tell and even if he could, Samuel struggled to remember what those seasons meant. The wind was still. The creek in the distance murmured like the whispers at a funeral procession. The insects, the animals—the creatures of the wood were silent. Again, Samuel fought to recall hearing any sound. A leather string holding an amulet lay on the ground at his feet and he picked it up. The charm was silver, three triple spirals connected and curling in on each other. He slid the leather string over his head until the amulet lay on his chest.

He walked in silence over branches sprawled on the ground and onto a rough path that wound itself farther into the forest. Samuel heard a slight rustle of leaves underneath his feet and yet his canvas sneakers did not make as much noise as they should have. The sun hung at an odd angle, tossing a bland shaft of light ahead, with most of the rays never reaching the ground. Samuel looked to the right and saw tattered, yellow caution tape dangling from the trunks of ancient oaks.

*What is this?*

The tape ran from trunk to trunk in tattered, random shreds like an abandoned crime scene. He reached out and tore a shred of tape from the tree while looking for the human remains that should have been there.

Samuel looked up into the canopy of branches, which hovered overhead like a worried mother. As far as he could see, ropes and nooses hung empty and cold. Piles of clothing, personal items, and other artifacts lay beneath some.

He tossed the scrap of tape to the ground and continued down the path, knocking aside a shoe, a sport coat, a backpack. He stopped and bent down to grab the backpack, the aching in his neck causing him to wince. The backpack was made of nylon, the zipper long gone and its teeth forever in a black grin. He reached into it, his fingers brushing against a few leaves that rustled inside. Nothing. He turned it over to reveal three characters embroidered on the front: BCD. He rubbed his head and stared at them until he recognized the letters of the alphabet, and a thin smile spread over his lips. He was not sure if those letters mattered anymore, and he could not

recall why they ever would. Samuel dug through a few of the mounds beneath the hanging trees, shoving articles of clothing into the backpack.

He threw the only remaining strap over one shoulder and shuffled farther down the path on instinct. He kept the pack to store items that might keep him alive. The creek moved closer with each step, and he was happy to hear its meanderings. The natural noise brought a brief sense of normalcy, a memory from childhood: long summer days in a valley and a creek that cut a ragged line through the forest. Some days he would spend hours in solitude, overturning rocks in a search of salamanders. On other days, he would throw stones across the bank with his brothers in a friendly competition that would end when his mother's voice echoed through the trees, calling them home for the evening meal.

He saw more items strewn across the path and kicked a pair of shoes to the side. So many shoes. He wondered why the shoes remained and the bodies did not.

Samuel looked down at his sneakers with Velcro instead of laces. A faded denim shirt hung open revealing a plain grey T-shirt underneath. His khakis sat loose on his hips. The guards did not care how well they fit the inmates.

The path curved as it approached the stream, turning right into a grove of high pines, their needles covering the ground. Samuel drew a deep breath through his nose, catching the faintest odor of pine, and it made him smile. He savored the distant aroma for as long as he could. It did not last.

He sat on the ground next to an abandoned, blue shopping bag and reached inside, pulled out the contents and arranged them in a circle over the pine needles. He remembered the names for most of them. Lighter. Pen. Nickel. A few he could not recognize, but his brain assured him he would. Samuel picked up the lighter with his right hand, pinched between a thumb and finger. Muscle memory snapped into place as his thumb struck down on the flint. The lighter sparked, and Samuel smiled. He could almost taste the burnt, woody smoke of a hand-rolled cigarette. He could almost feel the airy buzz with each puff of the tobacco. He struck the lighter again and again, but each time it failed to ignite, and each time it reminded him of the temporary satisfaction delivered by the nicotine. Another item returned to his expanding repertoire of old words as he opened a supple leather wallet.

Samuel removed the paper sticking out from its fold. As with the pine needles, he caught a faint whiff of the earthy, organic scent of the rawhide.

He looked up and noticed the sun had dropped closer to the horizon, as if touching the tops of the trees to ignite them. Darkness crept closer, surrounding the far edges of his vision. Samuel's toes became numb from the cold and he realized his exposure could kill him.

With the chill of the approaching night, the undoing of the universe tightened its stranglehold on this place, slowly crushing the life from it. Each universe exists infinitely close to one other much like grains of sand on a beach. The collection of universes is known as the multiverse. In this place, the reversion started on the edges where sounds disappeared and colors dulled, draining it all of rich, sensory perceptions. The physical world began to fold in upon itself and threatened to swallow everything into the eternal void. Not every universe was cursed with a reversion that held souls in transition, but this one was.

Using the reversion as his tool, Deva snatched those in need of salvation and dropped them into a dying world to find the path to redemption and release from the cycle: Should the soul fail to make a lifetime of wrongs right, it would reawaken in



another place, in another reversion. Spirit demands a resolution for all souls and Deva orchestrates it. Deva, the gatekeeper of the reversion, spent eons keeping the great cycle intact and would do so for as long as Spirit required it.

\*\*\*

The night came silently, stealing the remaining light from the forest and replacing it with an insufferable coldness. Samuel shuddered. He could no longer control the muscle spasms that racked his body and occupied his mind. The yellow tape, the shoes, the hunger. None if it mattered while his brain searched for a solution to the numbing cold brought by the night.

After walking for hours in no particular direction, he again relied on instinct, gathering branches and leaning them against a tree to provide the most basic shelter. With twigs and dried leaves, he created a mound of kindling. He stood and yawned before looking out into the expansive forest. He had no measure of his progress and thought it was possible he hiked in a long, meandering circle.

Samuel reached into his pocket, where he had stowed the mysterious artifacts. His hand found the lighter, which he pulled out. Again he wrapped his thumb and finger around the igniter, although the dropping temperature made it more difficult for him to strike the flint. He tried again, once, twice. On the third strike, the lighter coughed forth a weak flame. It flickered over the pinhole at the top of the metal. Samuel felt the brief burst of warmth and, before he could place his left hand over the top, the flame died. He shook the lighter and struck the flint again. The green flame returned, and Samuel pushed the tiny lever on the front of the lighter until the flame rose slightly higher than before. He smiled and reached back into his pocket, removing scraps of paper from the wallet and holding them over the flame. At first, the paper did nothing but curl and twist from the heat. But after a few moments, the flame leapt from the lighter. He dropped the lit paper on to the mound of leaves. Curls of grey smoke floated upward, stinging his eyes and burning his nose, and Samuel cried from the smoke. He could smell it. He was alive.

Within moments, the confined space between three pine trees blazed with yellow and green flames. Samuel was standing closer to the bonfire than he should, staring at the odd colors. His instinct told him to stand back, and yet the heat did not burn him. He shoved the lighter into his pocket and scurried past the fire, gathering pine needles, dried twigs and branches. He knew this fuel was needed to keep the fire going, to keep him alive. In a matter of moments, units of time Samuel could no longer measure, he sat basking in the glow of a roaring bonfire. He felt its warmth and closed his eyes. His stomach growled, protesting the hunger brought on by the activity.

Samuel laid his head on the empty backpack and curled his feet closer to the fire. He felt warm and safe and still alone, until the howl pierced the air.

His mind reeled as instinct took over. He stripped his clothes to the ground to rid himself of his human scent. He could not remember how he knew, but he recognized the howl of the alpha male. He knew the pack was coming. He knew if he did not hide from their sight and sense of smell, he would die.

The cold air bit into his back as the paltry fire warmed his front. He took inventory of the clothing he stuffed into his backpack, counting three shirts of various sizes, two pairs of shorts and one pair of athletic pants. He ran to the pile and put the athletic pants on, followed by a pair of shorts. He picked up the T-shirt he had worn and took a whiff. He could smell his own body odor, but it did not carry the musky, organic, overpowering scent it normally would have, but he didn't have time to figure out why.

The air felt heavy and diluted and Samuel wondered if there was something wrong with his senses or if it was this place. Nevertheless, it was closest to his body's scent and would have to do. He hoped to confuse the alpha male long enough to escape. He set the undershirt aside and pulled the clothing over his head until he stood dressed, with only a pair of shorts and a T-shirt left on the ground. Samuel felt his movement restricted in several layers of clothing worn by other people and realized if the alpha male was not disoriented by the mixing of scents, he would be easy prey.

He ran to one of the pine trees standing guard over his haven, unable to find a single knotted branch or knob that would serve him. He knew the clearing would soon be attacked by a pack of wild wolves, and he ran from one tree to another until he found what he needed, grabbing the stained T-shirt and wrapping the neck-hole around a thin branch while using another twig to create a crude cross on which the T-shirt rested, mimicking a human with arms outstretched. He then snatched the shorts from the ground and wrapped them over a piece of peeling bark so they hung beneath the T-shirt. The clothes on the tree sat higher than an average human, but he did not think the wolves would discern that detail in the heat of the hunt.

Samuel heard the soft crunch of the forest underbrush. He looked back and forth at the trees and over the fire, spotting one low-hanging branch within his grasp. His fingers fell a few inches short of the bark, and when he heard the low, earthy growls, he realized he had seconds to make a decision. Samuel jumped and grabbed the branch with both hands while swinging his legs as high as he could. Several objects fell from his pockets and clattered in a pile beneath the tree. As he glanced down, Samuel saw the first set of yellow eyes materialize from the dark recesses beyond the fire. He squinted and heaved upward until he sat on the branch with his feet dangling five feet from the ground. The alpha male came first.

\*\*\*

It smelled the burning wood long before its eyes found the origin of the flame. The creature nuzzled its nose deep into dank fur and flicked its ears twice before turning its muzzle toward the sky, letting loose with a growl that sounded more human than beast. Within moments, the rest of the pack surrounded the alpha male. Sets of yellow eyes darted back and forth through the hulking, black trunks. They seemed to disappear and reappear as though floating through the night.

*One has found flame.*

The pack settled and circled around the leader. With his fur rankled, he bared his pointy teeth at the slightly younger, more aggressive males.

*My kill, then your carcass.*

Although not the egalitarian split most of the creatures desired, it was the way.

The alpha male trotted across a felled tree, the trunk resting on a rocky outcrop jutting twenty feet high. He approached the zenith and stopped, catching the scent of fire, smoke and humans. While he did not share the same sense of time and space as other mammals, the wolf registered surprise. He had not expected man to still be here, and if he was, he had not expected man to enter his domain.

*Blood.*

The rest of the pack reared up behind the leader, letting loose with several rounds of howling, barking and gnashing. Several of the larger, older creatures snapped at the females. The leader called for blood. The hunt was on.

The alpha male leapt from the trunk, his sinewy frame propelled through the trees as if by an otherworldly force. The creature sprinted, and the pack followed at the

respected distance. The alpha male would not find a challenger this night—the first blood would belong to him. The pack undulated, a brown, grey and silver mass weaving through the trees and toward the fire springing up from the forest floor. Some of the cubs whimpered and ran beneath their mothers, for they had yet to witness the power of flame.

The alpha male crested a slight rise and slowed his descent toward the valley, scanning the horizon to see the thin, white line of Brother Moon. The creature stopped, his tongue flicking across his frozen muzzle. He lifted his head up and howled again.

The top arch of the moon poked above the tree line, but would rise no farther. The alpha male knew. He mourned the loss of the sky god hanging over the valley and illuminating the kills. Brother Moon held his gaze low like an insolent child, a bit lower each cycle.

The pack scampered behind the alpha male and waited. The creatures paced about with deep growls as they too gazed at the fire in the center of the valley, cursing the unnatural flame and drooling at the prospect of tearing its creator apart.

The alpha male dropped low, ears up. He moved methodically through the trees until the faint aroma of burning pine reached his nose. They had not lost the scent. Not yet. The others followed with growling bellies and cautious optimism. The feast would be the first in a long while. Mothers would push their cubs back from the killing spot and toss them the battered entrails left after the surge.

The alpha male continued to lead. The crackling of the burning wood became louder but muffled in the heavy air. He listened for the guttural tone of a human voice, but did not hear it, and he sniffed the air again, this time detecting the source of the scent.

#### *More than one?*

The younger, more aggressive males became excited by the thought of full bellies. The wolves nudged each other, even going so far as to bare teeth to preserve the attack order. After the alpha male had eaten, a battle would ensue for the bloody remains.

The alpha male spun with his hackles raised. He growled and bared pointy, yellow teeth at his pack. They would fear him or be consumed by him. At least that was how it had always been. The others cowered, especially the females and the cubs. A few of the more mature males skittered to the side but did not retreat. They sized up the alpha male, sensing they too might someday lead the pack. Someday.

#### *Now.*

He reared his head and howled. The rest of the pack imitated the alpha male until the sound consumed the dead of the night. He raced from his lead position toward the fire, with the pack following, dashing between trunks, through the remains of yellow tape and over lonely shoes with decayed laces. He sprinted over forgotten bones and rotted canvas tents. He kicked the artifacts of the world to the side, where they tumbled into silent obscurity.

The fire grew as the alpha male led his pack to the fight. It had been a long time since human blood was spilled in the valley and the alpha male basked in the anticipation. Although his eyes had lost range and focus, he was able to detect the human form against the tree on the far side of the fire. The yellow and green flames distorted the shape, but not enough to confuse the alpha male. The wolves snapped

at each other's tails as they followed the leader to the kill zone. Females, cubs and old wolves became lost in the instinctual euphoria of the kill.

He flew from the path, dashed around a fallen limb and turned straight for his prey. The alpha male's eyes lit, his snout pulsing with the chemicals of the predominant human scent, no longer uncertain of their numbers. He made one final lunge to the right of the fire and skidded to a halt in the dry dirt at the base of the tree. His head twitched back and forth at the shirt and shorts tacked there. He did not need to communicate his disgust and disappointment to the pack. His belly growled in protest of the ruse.



## Chapter 2

The leader approached his prey and looked up. The rest of the pack filled in behind the alpha male but kept their distance from the unnatural fire. The creature paced around the flames, sniffing the objects on the ground, and then craned its neck upward at the feet of the human.

*It must come down. That is the command given and the one I must follow.*

The rest of the pack whined and shuffled about. Several of the cubs lay on the ground, enjoying the meager warmth provided by the man's fire, while the male wolves stood behind the leader and looked up into the tree.

"Leave me alone," Samuel shouted.

He thought he could hear the alpha male chuckle. The sound escaped the wolf's muzzle like a short guffaw.

"Get out of here."

The wolves stood at attention, staring up at him. One would break off, circle its tail, and then come back to attention at the base of the tree.

Samuel looked up into the pine. Branches sprouted from the trunk like a pinwheel extending up into the blackness. Tendrils of smoke raced between them as the fire burned down to yellow coals, releasing the hiss of water inside the damp wood. Samuel reached for the next closest branch and climbed higher, until he sat on a wider branch, taking a deep breath and looking down at the pack twenty feet below.

*We wait.*

The alpha male sat and his ears came up. The other hunters did the same, while the female wolves remained on the outer edge of the camp. The pack formed a circle around the base of the tree.

Samuel felt a rumble in his stomach and a pain gripped his side. He could not remember the last time he ate. He rubbed the blooming bruises on his neck, a painful reminder of his time inside the noose. Samuel looked out from the trees, convinced he had found temporary refuge from the pack. A sliver of moon appeared above the canopy of pines, blossoming like spilt milk into the night sky.

*Are wolves nocturnal? They'll go back to the den once the sun comes up,* Samuel thought.

Samuel watched as a new light crested off the horizon. He did not see the blazing orb of his sun. He did not feel the warmth of the day. Hours passed, and yet the light failed to chase back the darkness, seeping upward until a dull grey blanket of mist descended on the forest. A quick pulse of memory shot through his head, a late-afternoon thunderstorm at the shore. The feeling lingered, but the specifics of the memory did not. He looked down at the pack. The females and cubs slept in bundles of fur, and the hunters rested their heads in their paws, all except one. The alpha male remained sitting, his eyes focused on Samuel.

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As the light faded yet again, Samuel felt the first cramps clutching his muscles, threatening to eject him from his safe perch. His stomach threatened to turn in on itself. He closed his eyes, unsure whether the hunger pangs could keep his mind off the muscle cramps or whether it was better to focus on the cramps to take his mind off of his hunger. Samuel's tongue felt as though it were wrapped in cotton. Mucous dripped from his nose, while his feet felt cold and dead.

*It weakens.*

The wolves pushed up onto all fours and began circling the base of the trunk. The alpha male reared back and howled. The cubs awakened with new fervor, hunger and bloodlust. Two hunters leapt onto the base of the tree as if threatening to climb it. They jumped back and forth, growling and snapping at each other's tails.

Samuel closed his eyes and the world swam beneath him. He lost his sense of direction and fell from the branch, lunging out and grasping another to stop his plummet. The branch slid beneath his fingers as he looked at the ground below, feeling dizzy. He expected the ground to rush up and snatch him from the precipice. Samuel reminded himself not to look down, wondering why that seemed to be the best advice for his fear of heights. The hunters saw the movement and the other wolves sensed it. The entire pack ran around the base, barking and growling in a frenzy. Samuel hung by one arm, his left foot five feet from the ground. He felt the sting as a pine branch opened a gash in his side, and blood dripped into the open maw of the alpha male.

*Not this way,* he thought, wincing.

He drew a deep breath and forced the pain from his mind. He considered giving up until the thought of the pack's teeth tearing at his flesh cleared his head. His mind raced through questions, reasons for the wolves' unending pursuit. But in that moment, he realized it did not matter. He would have to survive before he could have the luxury of reflection.

Samuel shook his head, fighting the haze and scrambling to reach a higher position. The alpha male lunged, clamping his jaws on the heel of Samuel's sneaker, shaking it left to right, rear paws digging into the dirt with every backpedal. Samuel kicked with his opposite foot but lacked power behind the motion. His toe bounced off the skull of the alpha male, agitating him more.

The other wolves crowded the alpha male, snapping at Samuel's foot in support of the leader. Samuel felt his grip loosening and his pants being tugged downward by another wolf that had a hold. He looked up at the branch, the tree about to fulfill his destiny of death in a way the noose could not. As his right hand released and another wolf climbed to his knee, a crack echoed through the valley. Samuel crashed to the ground as the wolves froze. They spun to face the sound as another shot whistled through the air and a slug lodged in the pine tree mere inches from Samuel's head.

*We will come back.*

The alpha male turned to snarl at Samuel before bounding over the remains of the fire and through the trunks of the pine trees. The hunters, the females and the cubs followed with their tails tucked.

Samuel looked over the fire with blurry vision. His breathing slowed and he sensed motion. A dark swath moved over the reemerging fire. It stopped and hesitated. The flames jumped back to life, and Samuel squinted in the light. Again the fire burned with a paltry, green hue, but compared to the blackness preceding it, Samuel shielded his eyes from the glare.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Close your eyes. We'll talk when your body has recovered."

Samuel rolled onto his back and laughed. Floating ash danced overhead against the black velvet sky. Bare tree branches reached for it like bony fingers.

"The wolves, they're coming back," he said.

"They will. They always do," the stranger said.

Samuel smiled again and closed his eyes. He would sleep, or he would die. Either would rest his weary mind.



### Chapter 3

"I hope Major finds him before the wolves tear him apart," Mara said.

"I don't give a rat's ass about Major, newbies or the wolves," Kole said.

Mara tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and shook her head. "Of course you do, Kole. You know Major can't get out of this one by himself."

Major's fate, his redemption, hinged on his ability to save them all from the reversion. Kole and Mara didn't have the knowledge or the ability to escape on their own. Each new visitor had the potential to manipulate this place without knowing it, but Major had seen it a number of times. It was up to him to mold the raw talent Deva sent his way. He bounced from one universe to another, but he was unable to do so in this one. Major needed Samuel alive long enough to figure out why.

"He's only out to save his own ass. I don't trust Major and neither should you."

Mara shrugged. "You have to trust somebody. As long as you know Major will sell you out to get what he wants, what's the big deal?"

Kole shrugged off Mara's question. "I'm not the one making a big deal about Major, am I?" He rubbed a hand across the tattoo that sleeved his right arm, trying hard to remain focused on the conversation he had with Mara dozens of times already. "Maybe you have a good reason to get back to whatever life you had, but I don't. I'm just as happy to stay here and let the cloud eat me."

Mara gave up, tired of the posturing Kole used to end all of their conversations. "Major is looking for someone or something. It's his only hope, and I feel like it's mine as well."

Kole looked at her and wondered how they were connected to the new visitor, and ultimately, to Major. He grew tired of the disappointment in Mara's eyes. Kole could feel a connection to the new arrival and yet he could not understand why.

He knew more about Mara's journey than Mara. He was with Major when she came through the forest, mumbling and disoriented like all of the troubled souls that fell from the noose. They took care of her and nursed her back to health in hopes she could find whatever it was they needed to flee the dying worlds. Major never said it, but Kole knew she wasn't the one, but she was the key to finding the one who would. Major told him she would draw that power like a magnet and that was why Kole pretended to tolerate her in Major's presence.

Kole and Major committed heinous, immoral acts in their lives and landed here. As far as Kole could tell, Mara had not and so he felt sympathetic towards her. He knew his own suicide brought him into the reversion, although he could not decide if he was alive or dead. Most days Kole struggled to tell the difference. When Samuel arrived, he felt the blood connection in his veins and knew this reversion would not end like the countless others that tossed him out and back into the cursed forest.

Mara convinced Major and Kole she couldn't remember crossing over. She kept that secret hidden away, fearful they would somehow use it against her. But she'd overheard Major and Kole talking at night about their old lives and she knew why they



were here. The men were violent, greedy and selfish. But they helped her navigate the forest and so she felt a thin and cautious connection to both. The collective energy of Major, Kole and Mara could release them all from the cycle, but only with Samuel's help.

\*\*\*

Samuel felt the nudge of the boot in his ribs and rolled over onto his back. A grey, gauzy haze still hung in the sky. He put a hand to his throbbing forehead and wondered how long it would take to feel normal again, if ever. Samuel detected movement across the remains of the night's fire, and a pulse of fear raced through his chest. The tree, the wolves and the howling—especially the howling—resurfaced in his head. He gulped the air and recognized the movement of a fellow human. Samuel squinted as he sat up on his elbows.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Does it matter?"

He shrugged. "I guess not."

He watched the stranger from behind. The man sat on a felled trunk, wearing a tattered, black overcoat mingled with dried leaves. He wore a black cloth headband tied at the back of his head above a ponytail streaked with shooting bursts of grey.

"Who are you?"

The stranger turned and faced Samuel. His eyes sat deep in his skull, surrounded by dark blooms of age and fatigue. The headband crouched low over his eyebrows, and the stranger's nose sat crooked, in between two red cheeks and lips melded together into a thin line. A bruise ran from his left ear, down across his throat, and then up underneath his right ear.

"Call me Major," he said.

"Is that a name or a rank?"

Major smiled and shook his head. "You ask too many questions."

Major placed his knife and sharpening stone on a rock, and the glint of the blade sparkled when it caught the dull glare of the daylight.

"You saved my life," Samuel said.

Major shrugged.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome . . . er?"

"Samuel."

"You're welcome, Samuel."

Major stood and walked over to Samuel, sitting on a rock facing him.

"What do you remember?" he asked.

"The noose."

Major's eyebrows pushed the headband up slightly.

"It didn't work. I know it was tight on my neck. I don't remember that, I just know it. Then it was at my feet, and the bruises on my neck turned red."

"Before that?" Major asked.

Samuel shook his head. "Nothing."

"Family, friends, work, women?"

Again, Samuel shook his head.

Major whistled and stood. "Haven't seen many that close who don't end up with rigor mortis."

"Close to what?" Samuel asked.

Major waved his hand in the air and bent down to rummage through a rucksack a few feet from the fire pit. He pulled out a plastic jewel case. The cover had four symbols on it, and the spine read "Threefold Law—*Revenant*." He tossed the CD to Samuel.

"Know what that is?"

Samuel smiled. "I'm not an idiot. It's a CD."

Major snatched it from his hands and tossed it back into the sack. "Personal, not cultural," he said, more to himself than Samuel.

Samuel stood and stretched his back. His stomach moaned, and he stepped toward Major. "I can't remember the last time I ate anything."

That shook Major from a momentary daydream. He pulled the rucksack closed and reached into the blue, plastic shopping bag behind it, grabbing cheese on wheat crackers wrapped in cellophane. He tossed them to Samuel.

"One of the few of those I have left. Might be one of the last ever."

Samuel tore into the snack crackers. The overpowering sting of salt flooded his mouth and his senses. And then, as quickly as it came, the taste disappeared. He chewed what now tasted like dried cardboard. Samuel finished the crackers and immediately recognized how thirsty he had become.

Major walked to the nearest pine, lifted a twelve gauge shotgun, and laid the barrel over his left shoulder. He loaded a lead pumpkin ball into the chamber and clicked it shut. Major grabbed the rucksack and swung it over his head.

"I've gotta go."

Samuel stared at him.

"I left you a water."

"Hold on. Where are you going?"

Major ignored the question and strode past Samuel toward the enveloping darkness of the forest. The filtered light retreated downward from the sky, leading Samuel to believe it was nearing dusk.

"What if the wolves return?"

"They will," Major said. "But not for two or three nights. I wouldn't linger here for too long, if I were you."

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Samuel sat at the base of the tree that had become his refuge from the pack. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. What he recognized as night returned, smothering what remained of the reflected light in the sky. He decided against following Major into the woods. The man must have been here much longer than he had, and it would not be difficult for Major to lose him. And then Samuel remembered the wolves and thought better of venturing into the wilderness on his own.

He reached over to the water bottle Major left and noticed a scrap of paper underneath it. Placing the bottle to the side, he unfolded the note.

*Most of the bodies have nothing of value. Scavengers cleaned them out. The trinkets lying in piles are worthless or don't work, neither of which will help you. I can't tell, but I think it's accelerating. Not at an even pace like a clock, but more like the tides. It moves faster the closer it gets. I've seen it before. I'm moving to higher ground. So should you.*

Samuel read the note again. It was not addressed to him, and it was not signed. He had to assume Major left it and decided another confrontation with the pack would not be in his best interest. He shoved his personal items into a pocket, drained the last of the water, and climbed the tree. When the morning glow crested over the horizon, he would follow Major's trail as far as he could and hope it would lead to higher ground.

\*\*\*

Samuel awoke. He had dozed on the branch, but would not go so far as to call it sleep. He felt pain in his hips, and his muscles ached from the slight tension needed to keep him balanced and in the tree. A thin beam of light appeared on the same horizon after what felt like more than a single night of darkness.

*It's accelerating.*

Samuel thought about the phrase in Major's note, and that the night felt longer. He shook his head and turned one ear toward the unending forest. Samuel had not heard them baying, nor seen so much as a falling leaf since Major left. The silence of the forest again felt suffocating, dead. He slid off the branch and climbed backward down the trunk until his feet landed on the pine needles.

Samuel made the decision to find higher ground before Major's note, and he walked into the forest in the same direction Major had, following the man's first few footsteps. Samuel laughed and remembered tracking a deer in his youth. He smelled the fresh blood and felt the crisp snap of the frigid winter air of days gone by. He stopped, frantic yet exhilarated. That memory had returned. If it did, others might as well.

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He spent the next few hours trudging through the ancient forest, unsure as to whether he was making progress or simply walking in a huge arc. Samuel had not come across his campsite again, so he considered his time as progress. He approached a narrow creek running across the path. The water moved over the low rocks and passed by without so much as a gurgle. The entire stream was silent. Samuel reached into his back pocket and removed the cap from the plastic water bottle Major left him. He dipped the bottle into the water and filled it to the top. Samuel sniffed the water, could not detect an odor, and poured a drop into his mouth. He swallowed and waited. His stomach did not cramp, and he could not detect a bitter or chemical taste. He threw the bottle back and drained it, refilling it three more times.

Samuel continued past the creek until the forest felt as though it tipped upward toward the sky. He knew he was moving to higher ground, even though Major's trail had disappeared. As he made the ascent, the trees thinned and the air felt colder. Samuel kept moving to keep warm, exhaling plumes of breath into the forest. He struggled to determine whether it was day or night. He trudged forward on an ever-increasing slope headed skyward. He leaned on the north side of a tree trunk, resting his legs and lungs. Samuel rubbed his eyes, certain the cabin he just spotted in the distance was a figment of his imagination.

Moss-covered shingles clung to the pitched roof. A lonely brick chimney jutted out at an angle that threatened to pull it over. Weathered wood shakes covered the front and side, their stain long since dissolved. The lone window to the right of the door was glazed with time, the dust giving it an opaque finish. Three steps led up to a door with a single brass knob and no lock.



## Chapter 4

Samuel came within five feet of the cabin and stopped. He looked over his shoulder, expecting the occupant to arrive and chastise him for trespassing.

"Major?" he called out.

No response.

"Major, are you in there?"

The surrounding forest swallowed the sounds like a muffling blanket of snow. Samuel strained to hear noise coming from inside the cabin. He was greeted with silence.

He took another step closer, scanning the ground for any sign of activity. A long spider web hung diagonally across the top right corner of the door, and other webs clouded the corners of the front window.

Samuel walked to the right, circling around the cabin. The wood shakes covered the other exterior walls, although some had fallen to the ground in clumps of rotted wood. He bent down and sniffed the crumbling shingle, expecting an earthy, organic scent. He caught the slightest hint of mold and nothing more. Coming around the other side and back to the front, he did not find a cistern, privy or any other evidence of habitation.

He looked up at the gloomy ceiling above and felt as though night was coming again. Though he struggled to find the rhythm of the day, he could not determine whether the night was a few hours off or perhaps minutes away. He saw the leader of the pack in his mind's eye and decided he was not ready to face the alpha male again. Major said he would be back. Had it been one night or two since the attack? Samuel could not remember. Time was stretched and thin like warm taffy.

The front door looked back at Samuel, unmoving and uncaring. He placed a foot on the first step and heard the wood crack under his weight, the first noise registered by his ears in a long while. He felt a tingling in the bottom of his foot that climbed past his ankle, over his knee, and bolted up to his shoulders. He pulled his foot back instinctively, and the electric buzz faded. When Samuel put his foot back on the step, it returned again like a low-voltage electric current. He looked down and his eyes widened. A crisp, brilliant, blue outlined his foot and extended to the outer edge of the step. The line glowed with an intensity that made Samuel squint. It cut through the drab grey-scape of the forest and the dreary sky. The wood beneath Samuel's foot felt solid, smooth. He became aware of a scent of fresh paint that reminded him of summers spent painting fences in the neighborhood.

Samuel closed his eyes as the memory rushed back.

*He sat on the ground in plush, green grass. An aluminum paint tray cradling a puddle of pure white paint sat next to him, a wood-handled brush resting on the edge. He stared straight ahead at a picket, one half bare, smooth and sanded while the top half sat glistening with a fresh coat.*

*"Hurry, Sammy. It's almost time for lunch. If you finish by one, we can head to the pool for the rest of the afternoon."*

*"I'm hungry. Whatyer makin'?"*

*"Grilled cheese and yogurt."*

*"I'll be in soon, Mom."*

Samuel opened his eyes, and the memory dissipated like a balloon carried away on the wind. He looked down and the blue outline flickered. He could see the rotted step fading through the painted one of another time and place. The tingling feeling in his body disappeared until he was left standing with one foot on the step and another on the ground.

The patch of illumination slipped lower in the sky as the darkness pulled it down to force another night. He thought of the wolves again and placed a hand on the doorknob, willing to risk entering the unknown instead of facing the wolves again. He turned the knob and pushed, but the door did not open. The howl of the wolves rose again, as if Samuel's touch triggered their bloodlust.

The shudder worked its way through Samuel's body until it triggered the Major's words in his head.

*They will return.*

A cold sweat broke out on Samuel's forehead, and he felt a rumbling in his bowels. The howling ceased for the moment, but he knew the next time it broke the unnatural silence, the pack would be much closer. He tried again, his hand gripping the doorknob with white knuckles. Samuel felt like the Arthur of old, trying with all his might to remove Excalibur from the stone. The knob would not move, so he pushed with one shoulder on the front of the door. The lazy spider webs dangled on his head, but the door did not give. He stepped to the side and used the palm of his hand to wipe the pane of the window. The next burst of howling made him shiver. The pack was closer. Much closer.

Samuel backed away from the window, spinning around and conducting a quick survey of the landscape surrounding the cabin. If he used a rock to break the window, the wolves would follow unless there was something inside the cabin he could use to bar it. He shoved his hands into his pockets but found nothing to help gain him access.

The howl that came next froze Samuel. He turned in the direction of the noise and swore he saw the yellow eyes bouncing between the scant trees of the elevated forest. Samuel placed both hands on the knob and shook as hard as he could. He leaned back, pulling with his body weight. The paws of the wolves rustled the leaves on the forest floor. Samuel looked over his shoulder without releasing his grip. The alpha male was back, and the light in his eyes spoke to Samuel without the need for words.

"Goddammit, open up," Samuel screamed at the door.

The alpha male growled low, fifty yards from the cabin. The wolf downshifted from a full sprint to a light gallop, ears up and fangs bared. The rest of the pack came into the tight clearing in front of the cabin, the other hunters behind the alpha male. The females and cubs remained safely at the edge of the tree line.

Samuel smelled the wet fur, the odor more pungent than any others since he fell from the noose. He felt the low, moaning growl emanating from the hungry beasts. They spread out until the cabin was surrounded. He turned and placed his back on

the front of the door. Samuel pushed his heels into the wooden step and drew a deep breath.

"I'm not giving in," he said to the alpha male. "I'm not dying without a fight."

The alpha male's ears twitched. He strutted closer to Samuel. The others took tentative steps closer, careful not to infringe on the territory of their leader. The wolf snarled with saliva dangling from his fangs. Samuel bent his knees and leaned forward until his rear pressed on the front of the door. He held up his fists in front of his face as if getting ready for a schoolyard brawl. The alpha male ducked his head and lunged forward. He took two bounds and opened his jaw in midair as Samuel closed his eyes and braced for the impact. At the moment he expected to have teeth tearing at his throat, Samuel fell backward into utter and complete darkness.

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Speckles of dust hung in the air, dancing on thin strings of light that penetrated the cabin through gaps in the shakes. Samuel blinked twice, feeling his eyes burn from lack of moisture. He lifted his head and turned to face the door while his body remained on the floor, the bare planks digging into his shoulder blades. Cobwebs dangled from the corners of the ceiling and stretched from underneath the cracked plaster. A narrow strip of light framed the door, leading Samuel to believe it was day, or the closest thing to daylight in this world.

An image of the alpha male snapped into place. Samuel closed his eyes and saw the feral, yellow eyes coming at him. He looked into the beast's empty recesses, not believing such a creature could ever possess a soul. He remembered the teeth, bared and hungry, ready to tear at his flesh. Samuel even recalled the alpha male's scent, which overpowered any lingering odor present.

Samuel shook his head and dispelled the memory. He sat up, stood and surveyed the cabin. A rickety table stood in one corner, the old-fashioned type meant for writing with a quill and inkwell. The wood appeared grey in the darkened room. A wooden chair with a three-rung back sat tucked beneath the tabletop. A rudimentary bunk hung two feet off the floor, the long side screwed into the wall with rusty hex bolts. A thin, lumpy pad covered the top of the bunk, which was crisscrossed with webs, but no pillow or blanket. The only other item in the room hung from a single nail protruding from the crown molding opposite the door. The frame sat askew in the middle of the wall.

At first, Samuel thought it was a mirror. Ages of dust covered the surface, hiding its identity. An ornately carved frame encapsulated the piece, seemingly out of place with the other basic furniture. Samuel approached it and wiped the length of the frame several times until he stood in front of a portrait.

The darkness and age made it difficult to determine whether it was a painting or a photograph. He could make out the profile of a woman, but not much else. Samuel walked to the desk and pulled the chair out from underneath it. Four dark circles sat on the floor where the dust could not settle. He wondered how many years it would take for the dust to fill those spaces. Samuel placed the chair on the floor in front of the wall and put his right foot on it. He pushed down. Other than a slight creak of the floorboard underneath, the chair felt sturdy. Standing on it brought him eye-level with the fastener and cable holding the portrait on the wall. He reached out and lifted the cable off the nail until the full weight of the portrait rested in both hands. He stepped back down to the ground. Something flickered deep within the recesses of his mind. Something stirred. Something familiar, yet just beyond his reach. Samuel walked

toward the lone window and the ambient glow of the anemic sun filtered through the grime. He wiped off more of the age covering the portrait until his eyes met those in the photograph—eyes he knew almost as well as his own.

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The woman in the photograph stood, positioned in the lower-right corner of the frame. Dark, long curls spilled about her shoulders and rested on her arms. She wore a black top, which combined with her dark hair to frame a pristine, youthful face. Her makeup and eyeliner made her look trendy and hip rather than cheap. Ruby lips pressed together into a thin smile that radiated warmth and good-natured teasing. But it was her eyes that ensnared Samuel, the way they had many years earlier. The woman's green eyes called to him, made him forget his name. They sat evenly spread on her face, and the eyeliner around them accentuated the contrast between her porcelain skin and emerald irises. Samuel used his finger to remove the dust from her cheekbones to her neck, as if he would somehow feel the warmth of her skin under his touch. He smiled and looked to her long, thin fingers cradled around a set of keys. With her head tilted to the side, he could almost remember what she was saying when the photograph was taken. Almost.

His eyes moved toward the top-right corner of the frame, where another figure stood. The man stood behind her angelic form. He wore his hair slicked back without the creep of a widow's peak, a white T-shirt beneath a black jacket, and his waist disappeared into the black background of the photo. He appeared to be leaning against a wall, his body behind her but his face turned toward the photographer. The man wore a fuzzy beard, spotty and uneven. Like the woman, he too sealed his lips into a slight smile, as if the photographer told a joke at the moment the camera shutter opened, capturing them before the remark forced them into open laughter. The man's left arm disappeared behind the woman, while his right hung at his side.

Samuel placed the frame on the ground, leaning it against the wall underneath the window. He sat on the floor and stared at it again. His mind raced, sifting through logic that no longer computed in a world that did not follow the rules of the one he knew.

He shook his head. In one moment, one brief observation of one photograph, a significant portion of his memory returned. That did not bother Samuel. What shook him to his core was how an old photograph of him and his wife made it inside a desolate cabin, abandoned for decades, in a dead world. That troubled him more than not knowing why he descended into this hell in the first place.

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"She was gorgeous."

Samuel jumped at the sound of the voice. Even though their conversation wasn't extensive, he recognized it.

"She still is," Samuel said. "I didn't hear the door open."

He turned from his spot on the floor in front of the photograph to see Major sitting on the chair now pushed back against the far wall. His silvery mane sprawled over his shoulders like the spider webs inside the cabin. The black headband he wore to hold it back was no longer in place, neither was the ponytail. Major's receding hairline held firm against the encroaching inevitability, even though the man was clearly within his sunset years.

"Maybe."

"What do you mean?" Samuel asked.

"I mean, maybe. She was gorgeous, she is gorgeous, and she is no longer gorgeous. All of that."

Samuel stood and approached Major. The old man sat, unbothered by the closing of distance between the two.

"Where did you go?" Samuel asked.

"You need to slow down and let your brain catch up with your mouth. You're asking questions before the answers to the previous ones make it inside your head. We're safe here. For now. I'm sorry I had to leave you so quickly, but if I hadn't, the wolves would not have driven you to this place, and that had to happen."

"What had to happen?" Samuel asked.

"There you go again."

Samuel stopped and put a hand to his forehead. He ruffled his hair and dropped back to the floor next to the framed photograph. He leaned against the wall and felt the chill leaking through the wood. The light that filled the window earlier now faded into lonely blackness.

Major nodded before speaking. "I can tell you a bit, but when I stop, I have to stop for reasons beyond your understanding. Can you live with that?" he asked.

"No. But I'm going to lie and tell you I can," Samuel said.





## Chapter 5

Samuel sat cross-legged on the bunk while Major remained in the chair. The old man grimaced as he lifted one leg and placed it over the other.

"The ligaments go before everything else, and there's nothing you can do about it. Remember that."

Samuel smirked and tapped his fingers on his thigh.

"Give me a second, Samuel. I need to think about how to frame this for you."

Samuel nodded. The old man stared at the ceiling, one hand rubbing the end of his chin. He opened his mouth, held it for a moment, and then shut it again. He repeated this two more times.

"Are the wolves coming back?" Samuel asked.

Major held a finger up to Samuel, lines creasing his forehead, which drove his eyebrows down in the middle.

"Did you ever play a musical instrument? Like a violin or a guitar?"

Samuel furrowed his brow and thought about the question. So much of himself remained as nebulous as the world outside the cabin.

"I think so."

"Good enough," Major said. "Do you know how sound is created on a stringed instrument?"

Samuel shifted again as the stiff base of the bunk dug into his backside. "What does this have to do with anything?"

Major shook his head. He swatted at the air in front of his face and fell back into the chair. "This isn't going to work."

"Sorry," Samuel said. "Tell me."

Major took a deep breath and continued. "When you pluck a string on a guitar, the vibration creates the sound. The string vibrates quickly, and the sound is not constant. The note is really an infinite series of oscillating sounds."

Samuel shrugged.

"Let me tell you the parable of the blind wise men and the lion. The blind men are hunting the lion, following its trail. Hearing it run past, they chase after it and grab its tail. Hanging on to the lion's tail, they feel the one-dimensional form and proclaim, 'It's a one. It's a one.' But then one blind man climbs up the tail and grabs onto the ear of the lion. Feeling a two-dimensional surface, this blind man proclaims, 'No, it's really a two.' Then another blind man is able to grab the leg of the lion. Sensing a three-dimensional solid, he shouts, 'No, you're both wrong. It's really a three.' They are all right."

Samuel held both hands up. "I don't understand what that means."

"Just as the tail, ear and leg are different parts of the same lion, this place and the one you're beginning to remember are different parts of the same world."

For the first time, Samuel stopped tapping his finger. He looked at Major and then at the floor. He turned to face the framed photograph and then the lonely window on

the other wall.

"So how do I get back to the tail, or the ear, or the leg or whatever the hell part of the world is mine?"

"I don't know," Major said.

"Why not?"

"Imagine walking on a vast beach, near the ocean. You scoop up a handful of sand. You sift the sand until a single grain sits in your palm. A strong gust sweeps off the water and knocks that single grain out of your hand. Could you bend down and pick it up off the beach? Would you know which grain was yours?"

"Are you trying to say millions of places are part of the same existence?"

Major shrugged. "Maybe billions, maybe an infinite number. I really don't know."

"That's really hopeless," Samuel said.

"Depends. If your place was healthy and vibrant, it might feel hopeless to leave. On the other hand, if all that you knew was slowly dying, unwinding, coming apart, it might feel like getting into the lifeboat before the ship sinks."

Samuel nodded.

"There is one more thing you need to know before we lie down for the night, something I want you to think about. Let your mind turn it over while you sleep. Just like grains of sand on a beach, these places exist in the same physical plane and often rub up against each other."

\*\*\*

Major let Samuel take the bunk as he slept on the floor. He thought Samuel's body needed time to adjust but he had spent enough time in the reversion to know sleep was never like it was before.

They awoke feeling no more refreshed than the night before. Samuel opened his eyes and watched Major remove two cylindrical objects from his bag and place them on the floor. The designs on the labels had long since faded. Major used a tool from his belt and pried the lid off the can. A faint and barely recognizable scent rose from the floor.

"Sauerkraut?" Major asked. He handed a can to Samuel while using two fingers to dig into his own.

"Cabbage of some sort, right?"

Major nodded while shoving more of the wet, cold breakfast into his mouth. Samuel scooped up a handful and felt the consistency of the substance, detecting a hint of salt, but the sensation dissipated until he was left eating a tasteless, odorless meal.

"I thought I remembered sauerkraut being really strong."

"You'll get those feelings or intuitions the longer you're here. It's like your mind slowly unrolls them for you so your psyche isn't run over by the flood of data."

Samuel let the comment roll around toward the back of his head. "Why isn't this cabbage strong? Why can't I smell it or taste it?"

Samuel stopped and cocked his head sideways.

"I don't know," Major said. "I mean, I can feel it. I know you have, too. Things here feel like they're not quite a hundred percent. You know what I mean? Just look at the tint of any flame you light here. It's always off, some shade of yellow or green. The sun, the odors, my taste buds. None of them operate at full speed. This place feels like it's at sixty percent."

Major smiled while Samuel stared at the floor.

"Each place seems to have constants but with slight variations. They all keep a thread that unifies them. Like our blind men chasing the lion, they'll never grab a beak or a fin. They could grab a stub of an amputated tail or half of an ear that was bitten off in a fight, but it will always be lion-like. Never not lion-like."

"I don't think I understand."

"Neither do I, but you get used to it with each passing cycle. Eat your sauerkraut. We need to get out of this cabin before Wolfman Jack and his crew come back to finish you off."

They finished their meal and sat on the edge of the bunk while their stomachs rumbled in protest. Samuel glanced at the framed photograph leaning against the wall. Major nodded toward the nail.

"Can't hurt to put it back," Major said.

Samuel stood and replaced the photograph on the wall. He stepped back and looked again, nudging the corner up until the frame hung straight.

"That shit pops up everywhere."

"What does?"

"Reflections. These little reminders of other places. They don't ever seem to be as vibrant as the originals. That's why I call them reflections."

Samuel nodded.

"And there's no point in trying to take the reflections with you. Your attention will be somewhere else, and when you look back, the reflection will be gone. I know you considered rolling that photo up and tucking it in your waistband, but you'd end up with nothing but a blank piece of photo paper sooner than you realize. Best to leave it here and not torture yourself with it."

"Where to?" Samuel asked. He dusted his pants off and faced away from the photograph.

"I've got a feeling someone who can help us has popped out. He's at least a two-day hike from here, and through some pretty tough shit. Gonna make the fight with those wolves seem like walking your dog in the park. Plus, I've got two other friends I'd like you to meet."

Samuel raised his eyebrows. "Or I could sit in this cabin, staring at the reflection on the wall while waiting for death."

"Something like that," Major said.



## Chapter 6

Both men slept the entire day and through the next night. The reversion distorted time in a way that left them groggy and slow despite the hours spent asleep. Samuel opened his eyes and saw Major sitting on the same chair, rubbing a sharpening stone over multiple blades. The rhythmic scraping annoyed him. The meager light penetrating the slate skies had returned, signaling a faint resemblance to the mornings of Samuel's old life. He reached up to his neck and let his fingers trace the interlocking spirals of the medallion hanging from the leather string.

"What's that?" Major asked, his eyes making contact with Samuel's while the sharpening stone continued working on the blade of a curved knife.

"A triskelion. Some call it a triskele."

Samuel hesitated, surprised the information was so readily available to his brain. Major saw the look on his face.

"That reflection on the wall is starting to jar things loose. Go ahead. I'm sure you can recall what it is and why you're wearing it. I'd like to hear about that."

Samuel paused and closed his eyes. He could feel the triskelion on his neck and felt the knowledge seeping back into his head.

"They're not sure where it came from, but most archaeologists date it to the European Iron Age, Celtic in origin."

"Sounds like you know what you're talking about," Major said as he smiled. "Go on."

"They had some evidence the symbol was used for a very long time, as early as the Greek and Mycenaean civilizations centuries earlier, but the Europeans assimilated it. Wales, Brittany, they all used a variation of the form."

Major waited as the blade slid back and forth across the stone.

"*QUOCUNQUE JECERIS STABIT*. Wherever you throw it, it will stand."

"Latin, right?" Major asked.

"Yes. It's a motto on a coat of arms. Olaf the Black."

Samuel stopped and rubbed his head. It felt as though a door opened, one he struggled to pry loose from the rusty hinges of his damaged mind.

"Historian? Archaeologist? Maybe you just read a lot," Major said.

"Yeah, could be," Samuel said. "The Nazis corrupted a version for the Third Reich. I think it represents timeless human symbolism, like the cross."

Samuel stopped as he discovered the flow of information behind the door. There was nothing more to unearth, at least during this conversation.

"Nazis. I've seen reflections of them, too. Mostly the swastika on armbands or officer caps. Not much more."

"Where did you see this stuff?" Samuel asked.

Major shook his head. "My blades are sharp. Got your stuff together?"

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The two men stepped out of the cabin. Samuel drew a deep breath and noted he could no longer smell the pine needles underfoot. The forest felt as silent as a snowstorm blanketing the landscape. Even the air felt dead on his skin. He detected an absence of temperature, as if this place existed in a vacuum.

Major looked down into the valley and then back toward the summit, which stuck out over the chimney of the cabin. He secured his belt and sheath over his left hip, pulled the black headband down over his forehead and nodded at Samuel.

"Reversion."

Samuel stared at Major and shrugged his shoulders.

"Is that why this place doesn't have odors, sounds?"

"I think so. This place is in a reversion. Rewind. It's 'undoing' itself. We'll have a lot of time to talk during the hike. I'd rather set off now before the alpha male returns. Let's go."

Before Samuel could reply, a lone howl pierced the atmosphere and raised the hairs on his neck.

"Guess we won't have to wait long, after all," Major said. "Your biggest fan is back."

\*\*\*

The wolf glared at the hunters by his side.

*They set forth.*

The other hunters snapped and paced in circles.

*Yes. Now there are two. The old man has returned seeking his escape. We are not to allow either, as He has spoken. Take the elder down first.*

The alpha male trotted to the edge of the clearing and looked over his shoulder. The other hunters followed with a burning hunger in their stomachs.

The pack wound through the trees until the forest thinned with the rising elevation. Their sinewy bodies moved through the underbrush in silence, the leaves no longer rustling in the stillness of the air. When the alpha male crested the last rise, he could see the tip of the chimney protruding from the top of the cabin.

*They wait for us.*

He broke into an even-paced run, with seven hunters in line behind him.

\*\*\*

"They will always go for the throat," Major said.

"Are they reflections?" Samuel asked.

"I'm not sure, and I don't want to find out the hard way. They want you, not me, but they will attack anything that gets in their way. If they are sentient creatures, they no doubt feel the reversion like we do. They're in self-preservation mode, and that means they will fight to the death."

Samuel drew a deep breath and nodded. Major shoved his hand underneath his coat and removed another curved blade. He squeezed the blunt edge between his thumb and forefinger and spun the handle toward Samuel in one motion.

"Ever use one of these?" he asked.

"Maybe," Samuel said. "I can't quite remember."

"The early Arabs called it a scimitar."

"Sounds like you have some history in your background as well," Samuel said.

Major ignored the comment and continued. "They're designed to be light and used to slash in a diagonal direction, not a stabbing motion. If you strike across the muzzles of the wolves, you'll make it impossible for them to clamp their jaws on your throat."

That visual made Samuel shudder.

"And the blade is extremely sharp. Remember that on your follow through."

Samuel nodded. "What happened to your shotgun?"

"This," Major said, holding two empty shell cases in the palm of his hand. "No sporting goods stores around here."

"What's our strategy against the pack?" Samuel asked. "What's the best way to take them out?"

"I have no idea," Major said. "I've never fought a wolf before."

Before Samuel could respond or find a way to deal with his fear, the alpha male appeared from the edge of the tree line. The creature strutted up the slope with several hunters following him. His feral, yellow eyes never left Samuel. They seemed to float through the thick blanket of perpetual dusk that draped this place.

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The men stood shoulder to shoulder with their weapons drawn. A bead of sweat rolled down Samuel's nose and dropped to his upper lip as they watched the wolves trot toward the cabin. The wolves knew their prey would not run or lock themselves in the structure this time.

*The young one is mine.*

The other hunters whined and gathered to the left of the alpha male. They spread out until they formed an arc that faced the old one, and the alpha male fanned out to the right until his trajectory aligned with the young one. They stopped twenty yards from the cabin. Several of the wolves snarled and began throwing their heads toward the sky. The alpha male felt the hypnotic pull of the moon. He searched the heavens for the celestial body, but could not locate it. Millions of years of evolution, interrupted by the reversion, left him feeling out of sync, distraught. He shook his head and picked up the pace toward his prey.

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"I'm ready."

"You'd better be," Major said. "The alpha male wants you all for himself."

Before Samuel could say another word, he saw the rest of the pack spring into a run toward Major. Through the corner of his eye, he saw a blaze of fur, teeth and those yellow eyes. Major bent his knees and raised his arms, ready to slash at the first beasts to reach him.

Samuel glanced back and noticed the alpha male closed the gap and was within an arm's reach of him. He dropped to his knees and raised the scimitar as the alpha male lunged over his head. He felt the movement of air caused by the beast and rolled over. Samuel jumped and spun in the opposite direction as the wolf came back at him. The creature paused and bared its teeth, and Samuel felt a stabbing pain in the middle of his head. Pressing a palm to his forehead, he could feel someone or something else inside, like a cancerous intruder.

*I must devour you. I must honor His command or I will die with this world.*

Samuel felt the words enter his mind rather than his ears. He blinked and looked at the alpha male.

"Why?" he asked.

*You are my reflection.*

Samuel shook his head and raised the knife to a defensive position. The alpha male took three long strides forward and stopped. He bared his teeth at Samuel before darting off in the other direction, toward the rest of the pack surrounding Major.

The other hunters pushed Major back against the rear wall of the cabin. He stood with a knife in each hand and a wicked smile on his face. The wolves, ears up, pinned him there until the alpha male came up from behind.

"I'm waiting," Major said to the wolves.

*Take him.*

The hunters lunged forward. One locked its jaw around Major's ankle while another reeled back from the slash that opened its throat. The wolf died before it hit the ground. Another wolf bit into Major's left arm while two more flanked the alpha male. Major brought the blade in his right hand across his body until it slashed the muzzle of the wolf on his arm. He heard a whine and felt the pressure release on his wrist, followed by the warming pain of torn flesh. He brought the heel of one boot down on the head of the wolf latching to his ankle. The animal let his leg loose and stumbled into the wall of the cabin.

The alpha male howled, and his two sentries ran at Major. One leapt at his throat while the other bit at the injured ankle. Major cried out as the wolf's teeth snapped at his chin. He turned in toward the cabin wall in a desperate attempt to knock the animals loose. When Major dropped to his knees, the alpha male came forward. He opened his mouth, and his eyes flared yellow in the disappearing light. The wolf reared back on its hind legs, ready to lunge.

Samuel came around the corner as the alpha male leapt at Major. He felt his breath catch as he realized when the wolf finished with Major, he would be next. Major caught the wolf on his chest, the weight of the beast spinning him to one side and knocking him backward over a downed tree limb. The mixture of man and beast rolled to a stop. The alpha male sprang to his feet and, a second later, Samuel landed on him. He had his hands around the wolf's neck, his fingers gripping fur while the alpha male snapped at his face. With his upper body pointing down the slope, Samuel brought both legs up and in front of the alpha male until the back of his calves rested on the wolf's head. In one motion, he brought his legs back, heels first, driving the beast to the ground. Samuel heard the yelp and the cracking of bone on the hard earth, and he stood and kicked the alpha male in the ribs. He felt a surge of adrenaline at the beast's cry and realized there was hope. The wolf jumped up and ran toward the tree line with one rear leg dangling in painful limbo.

As he watched the alpha male run, Samuel began to pursue the beast before he heard another scream from Major. He winced as the white underside of the alpha male's tail disappeared beyond his sight.

*We are not finished.*

Samuel felt threatened by the thought, but he had to put it aside for now. He saw two more hunters approaching Major. A knife dropped during the fight rested near one of the steps, and Samuel lunged for it and spun with the sharp edge out, slicing an ear off one of the wolves. The animal cried out and scratched at the stump with one paw. Samuel knelt and sliced horizontally through the air, his blade cutting through the mangy fur and major arteries of the wolf's neck. It flopped to the ground while blood poured from its wounds. By this time, Major maneuvered on top of the last remaining hunter and his knife was raised high, ready for the plunge.

Samuel took a step closer, staring at the carnage left by the battle with the pack. When he bent down to examine the tail of one wolf, another memory filled his head.

*"He's gone now, honey," came the smooth, reassuring voice of his mother.*

*"Where?" asked Samuel, a boy of five.*

*"Up to heaven, with God."*

*Samuel squeezed his wolfie doll tight. He inhaled the scent of stuffed animal and the smell of his sheets.*

*"Maybe Grandpa wants wolfie doll with him."*

*Samuel's mother smiled. She dabbed the corner of each eye with a balled tissue.*

*"He'd want you to keep wolfie, hon. Grandpa won't need him in heaven. God will give him everything he needs."*

*Samuel nodded. He looked down again at the corpse of his grandfather in the casket. The white satin lining made it appear as though the man was floating within a cloud. Samuel noticed the wedding ring and yellow, tobacco-stained fingertips of the man who had always given him spare nickels from his pockets. Samuel thought about the way the coins felt warm in his palm.*

*"Will he get his smokes in heaven?" Samuel asked.*

*"He will," his mother said.*

*Several other goliaths towered over Samuel as they approached the casket to pay their final respects. Two men wore dark green uniforms slathered in medals of various sizes and shapes. They left the folded, triangular American flag next to the casket.*

*"Your gramps fought like hell for his country in World War Two," one man said. The other simply stood with a face of stone.*

*Samuel's mother patted her son on the head and bowed slightly to the uniformed man that spoke.*

*More adults came forward, each one speaking to Samuel's mother with words meant for him.*

That little boy closed his eyes, and when he opened them, Major sat on the ground, wrapping his wounds and staring at the tree line where the alpha male disappeared.

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"Are you hurt?" Samuel asked.

Major shrugged. "They bit me."

"I hurt the alpha male, but he ran away," Samuel said.

"I know. It's okay. You and him ain't done yet. At least that's what I've heard."

"From who?"

Major just shrugged and continued wrapping a strip of cloth around his left wrist.

"Should we get going and find the others?" Samuel asked.

"I need to rest first. I think we bought ourselves some time."

"How much time?"

"Enough."

Samuel nodded as the last of his adrenaline subsided. He felt gnawing aches and pains coming from everywhere. His eyes felt heavy, and his legs became pillars of stone.

"Seems like we both need another night," Major said.

Samuel walked back into the cabin. He dropped his body to the bunk and fell into a deep sleep.





## Chapter 7

Samuel was awakened by his own snores, the sound pulling him from an undisturbed rest, and he blinked and stretched his arms. Dull pains came to life as a reminder of the combat with the alpha male and his pack. He looked around the room. The chair sat empty, pushed under the ancient desk, and the few personal items Major left on the floor were no longer there. Samuel stood and eased the door of the cabin open. The trees, the skyline and the forest all sat in perfect silence. Not a single motion caught his attention. Samuel took a deep breath and could not smell the pines. He stood over the corpses of the wolves, inhaled and again smelled nothing.

"Major," he yelled.

No reply.

He stared in the direction the alpha male left and then opposite, in the direction he assumed they had to travel. Again, not a single thing moved. Samuel tried to remember what Major said about a reverting or a rewinding, but he could not place it. Whatever it was had accelerated, and Samuel wondered how long it would take before everything, including himself, would be forever frozen in the solitary landscape. Before he could ponder that question, an item on the ground near the cabin caught his eye: one that had not been there the night before. He bent down and picked up a piece of paper, weathered and folded in half. Samuel glanced to the horizon and noticed a slight puff of charcoal that faded into deep obsidian. He felt the looming, endless night and shivered.

He unfolded the paper to reveal a strong but flowery handwritten script. He recognized "Major" scribbled at the bottom, and he sat on the step of the cabin to read it aloud.

*"Samuel. I am sure you find my appearances and disappearances troubling. I'll bet you're confused about this place, this existence. The current reversion is accelerating, much like the others I've experienced. I know you've felt that. I am probably three to four days from rejoining you at the Barren, the remnants of a village. It could be a collection of reflections. I'm not sure. Whatever it is, structures are there like the cabin. To get to the Barren, you'll need to follow the path from the cabin to the summit. Looking down into the valley, you'll see a winding pass that will take you through a wide marsh, eventually ending at the foot of another mountain. You'll see the peak from the summit of the hill above the cabin. Stay on the path that cuts east around the base and it will take you to the opposite side. The Barren sits on a high plain surrounded by unattended wheat fields. The cabins look like deer nestled in the grass from above. Wait there for me. I've left you a scimitar in the desk drawer. If you stay on the path, you won't need it. Stay on the damn path. Until then, Major."*

Samuel shook his hand and reread the note.

"What about the alpha male?" he asked the dead air.

He stood and went inside the cabin. Samuel reached into the desk and retrieved the scimitar Major left. The blade sparkled as if it had been sharpened, polished and oiled. The leather binding wrapped around the handle and provided a solid grip. Samuel could not remember if he saw Major using this knife in the fight with the wolves. He tied the sheath to his right thigh and the top of it looped through his belt. Samuel tossed his few personal belongings into the rucksack and wished he had a flashlight.

The framed photograph hung on the wall in the same place it had for decades. The undisturbed dust covering it spread out even and smooth. Samuel stepped forward and brushed the dust from the surface as he had the first time he noticed it hanging in the cabin. This time, however, there was no picture underneath the glass, just a black square. Samuel moved closer to the surface of the glass, imagining his hand might push through it and the wall, appearing on the outside of the cabin. Instead, his hand stopped. The picture was gone as Major said it would be.

*The reflections aren't as strong as the original, they don't last long.*

That's what Samuel remembered. He frowned and stepped back, deciding he did not care much for the reflections. He cared even less for this place.

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He decided to keep moving. When he looked down from the summit, he could no longer locate the cabin. He struggled to find the path winding through the trees. The horizon melted into the earth. The reversion was physically manifesting before his eyes as a massive hazy cloud rolling across the land like a dark, silent avalanche. It was not moving as fast as a summer thunderstorm, but it was clearly moving from west to east and swallowing everything below. Samuel told himself to visually mark its progress. As long as the reversion did not leap ahead, he could manage to stay ahead of it on the way to the Barren. He laughed and shook his head, wondering if the Barren would provide a safe haven or simply be the final destination to succumb.

Samuel put the summit behind him. He crept down the mountainside, switching back and forth on the path in a steady descent. He lost sight of the horizon and that skewed his sense of direction. Without the horizon or a map, Samuel hoped he could find the Barren, and Major, and whatever stood beyond that. By the time Samuel reached the valley floor, his muscles ached. He felt the sweat clinging to his clothes and robbing his body of heat as the exertion slowed him down. He tipped his forehead underneath his left arm and sniffed. His nose could not detect the faintest scent.

Samuel walked a few hundred yards on the path stretching into the valley floor when the landscape began to change. As he came down the mountain, the trees reappeared in greater number and proximity. The trail narrowed until it was barely wide enough for him to pass. The massive, deciduous trees gave way to low-hanging weeping willows and their long trails of thin leaves. He identified Spanish moss on the trunks of several, which confirmed he had reached the marsh Major mentioned. Samuel drew a deep breath and caught the slightest hint of brackish water and rotting vegetation. He drew another to confirm it was real.

*The reversion must unwind from one direction of this place to the other,* he thought as the cloud oozed from the western horizon toward the east, much the way natural weather fronts moved.

With the hope he was outpacing the ominous cloud approaching the summit, Samuel decided to rest. He could no longer regulate day and night. The light source in this world had burnt out like an old incandescent bulb in a lonely room, spilling the last feeble rays into eternal darkness. He laid the rucksack at his feet and looked over a shoulder at a pile of loose branches near a rock. He gathered them up and ran a hand over the surface, detecting a hint of moisture, but not enough to keep it from burning. He was not sure if he was going to need the light or the heat, but creating a fire for his camp felt like the right thing to do. Samuel arranged the twigs in an A-frame design and removed the lighter from his pocket. He bent down low and rocked his thumb back on the flint when a voice broke the heavy silence.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

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Samuel spun around, expecting to see Major. He saw nothing but the faint outline of the willows standing guard over the marsh. He shook his head and pulled his thumb back again, this time sure he could ignore the phantom voice in his head.

"Don't do that."

Samuel turned his head toward the voice. He watched as the outline of a human appeared to rise from the marsh. Water dripped from the ends of patchy strings of hair as the form walked toward Samuel. Strips of clothing that once covered a body with style dangled from pointed elbows and knees. It was not until the person stood before Samuel that he was able to see the face.

The man stood with the dying light reflecting off of his exposed bone. Clumps of white covered his face where skin had once stretched over his skull. He had two black holes for eyes, and his mouth was parted in a demonic grin.

"It speeds up the reversion. I don't know why, but it does," the man said, now standing before Samuel.

"Okay," Samuel said.

"I'm dead," the man said.

Samuel shifted his legs and stood to face the man. He detected a whiff of decay, which disappeared quickly. The flotsam from the marsh clung to the dead man's frame like a cape hung from bony shoulders.

"The dead don't speak. Or walk."

"They do here."

The dead man moved toward the stack of twigs. He sat on the ground with a wet plop. His hand, stripped of skin, motioned for Samuel to do the same.

"Let's talk," he said.

Samuel nodded and sat on the other side of the woodpile, never taking his eyes off the dead man. "What should I call you?" he asked.

"I cannot reveal my name yet," the man said. "You can call me whatever you want."

Samuel nodded again.

"It must have something to do with the changing form, you know. Wood, to fire, to ash. It's like an energy tide that rolls the darkening cloud faster toward the opposite horizon."

Samuel looked at the lighter in his hand and dropped it back into a pocket.

"Are you alone?" the man asked.

"Yes."

Samuel sat there and decided to let the dead man have what he needed from their interaction. After a prolonged silence, the man spoke again.

"Do you know of the Jains?" he asked.

Samuel shook his head and thought about the sleep he craved. "No."

The dead man rocked backward and placed both bony hands on his knees.

"They were the first, in your original locality, to come up with the idea of *ahimsa* – do no harm. They called themselves 'the defenders of all beings.' Do you know why?"

Samuel did not reply, knowing the conversation would occur anyway.

"The Jains believed in conquering desire as a way of achieving enlightenment. Enlightenment, for them, was escaping the cycle of rebirth. Reincarnation was a curse to avoid, not some type of immortality."

"Sounds Buddhist," Samuel said.

"It is. Mahavira and Buddha were contemporaries. But they are not the same." The dead man paused before continuing. "Because of their belief in the cycle of rebirth, Jains also believed every living thing had a soul. Not just intelligent creatures, but the trees, birds, plants. Everything. So the pain man inflicts on other living creatures is really the pain he inflicts on himself. 'Many times I have been drawn and quartered, torn apart, and skinned, helpless in snares and traps, a deer. An infinite number of times I have been felled, stripped of my bark, cut up and sawn into planks.'"

"That's not possible. You can't exist without destroying something else that is living," Samuel said. "I must kill to live. Everything in existence must kill something to stay alive."

"You can if you are not of the living."

Samuel raised his eyebrows.

The dead man stood. His bones cracked. He turned toward the marsh and took stilted steps to the water's edge. When the black liquid crept up to his knees, he turned to face Samuel once more.

"Rest. Sleep. Dream. I hope you can find the peace I cannot."

The dead man, known as Deva, pushed forward until the water of the marsh converged over the top of his head. Samuel watched a single bubble arise and pop soundlessly in the darkness as he fell asleep.

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The Great Cycle existed before time began. Worlds expanded and collapsed repeatedly like a cosmic heartbeat. Deva was one in a long line of overseers, responsible for managing the powers of the reversion and then transferring that power to a son. The Great Cycle could not operate without a guardian in the same way a timepiece could not operate without a watchmaker. Deva had what might have been known as a normal life. But that existence was so far in the distant past, memories were nothing more than fleeting sensations of love and pain.

On Earth, civilization degenerated into war, famine and disease. The leaders of the world did nothing to stem the destruction, making decisions that filled their pockets with riches while the masses starved and died. It was then the unknowable and omniscient powers that sustain the Great Cycle cast the souls of that wretched world into another more desperate place, in an attempt to cleanse it. The people of Earth awoke to a barren and lifeless landscape. A black cloud came from the west and those who fell beneath it were dispersed to another random reversion, thereby spreading Earth's original population across many worlds. Some inhabitants took their own lives during the transition and those souls re-entered by falling from the trees with a noose around their neck, as Samuel had.

As more people arrived in the world of the reversion, the same patterns emerged. The strong formed clans for protection against rival clans and men built strongholds in the mountains. The reversion protected the space where the final portal would open, usually at the point of highest elevation. Territorial disputes led to war, just as they had on Earth. Many souls gave up and let the cloud swallow them, reducing populations in the reversions to pockets of survivors trying to outrun the cloud. They had no promise of surviving if they could outrun it, and no knowledge of what waited for them if they did.

Deva came through the forest with his children, but he never learned the fate of his Earth wife. He pledged allegiance to a tribal leader and the group fled from the forest and into the raw wilderness of the reversion. Samuel and Mara were with him. They came as his spiritual offspring after having many past lives on Earth, as all people there did. Kole was Deva's spiritual son too, but he did not come through the first reversion with Samuel and Mara. He arrived in a different reversion and ended up in the same one as Deva much later. As the group ran from the horde, Deva was separated from his children and knew nothing of their fate. After conversations with others coming through the suicide forest, Deva discovered souls swallowed by the cloud were dispersed to different reversions until they could find redemption by righting a wrong committed in a past life. It was his first true understanding that the reversion was not a new world but an infinite series of worlds.

Over the years and through countless cycles Deva came to learn the ways of the reversion. In the reversions he would encounter his spiritual children in different physical forms, but he always knew it was them.

In Deva's thirty-third reversion, he discovered the orb. He found it deep in a cave when the cloud pushed him inside. He spent the next seventy reversions of the Great Cycle staring into it, studying the natural laws of the new world. Deva learned the reversion had an overseer, a guardian. It was the duty of the lord of the reversion to ensure another was in succession. He discovered his spiritual father left the orb for him. When Deva knew he was next in line, he marched the orb to the mountain peak of the reversion and sat across from his father at the cauldron. Without much ceremony, Deva's spiritual father gave his son control, with the understanding he would have to do the same someday. Deva's release from the cycle would be complete when the next guardian, his son, was in place.

Although he had not done so in eons, Deva made the climb to the peak many times with hundreds of his spiritual sons, and yet none made it all the way to the cauldron, the point of transition. He always saw an aura around his spiritual sons which distinguished them from others moving through the reversion. Deva knew Kole and Samuel were not like his other sons. They came through portals and slipped reversions and gained knowledge of their new universe. Samuel was his natural firstborn and therefore most likely his successor. However, the paradox was not lost on Deva. He wanted Samuel to take his place and set him free.

At the same time, Deva's responsibility dictated he put every obstacle in Samuel's path in order to make sure he passed the test. Only the true heir would make it to the peak, and Deva expected to see Samuel on the other side of the cauldron when the time was right. Until then, Deva would wait for the cloud to push the inhabitants of the reversion toward the mountain, hoping the next climb to the peak would be his last.

The cloud would keep pushing Samuel to a cave where he would talk to Deva again. Getting Samuel there to make amends with those he wronged in past lives was

the first step in the process of becoming the next overseer.

\*\*\*

Samuel awoke tired and achy. He gathered his things and took one last look at the marsh before continuing on the path, heading east toward the Barren and his meeting with Major. The dark cloud pushed ever closer, devouring this place.

Samuel could not remember the point he left the path. He recalled the snow and the cold, and the continued silence, but he felt as though one moment he stood on the worn ground and the next he was knee-deep in grey snow.

The heavy flakes floated from the sky. They landed one on top of another and covered the ground within an hour. Samuel thought the snow could have been white, but without daylight and the reflection off the snowpack, the precipitation fell in waves of grey. He could not see the dark cloud that came from the west, but he felt it. He knew it was there, above the winter storm in the place where winter did not exist.

He trudged onward, sensing east as best he could. The snow came in silent waves, burying the marsh, the path, and obscuring the mountain from view. Samuel realized his shirt and pants would not be enough for him to survive if this was indeed the onslaught of winter. This place carried no warning of the changing season, no hint of the autumn's leaves.

Samuel felt the snow suffocating his breath with the cold wind on his back. The ice kept his fingers numb, the fatigue pulling his eyelids down. He stumbled and used his left hand to brace for the fall. Samuel's body collapsed and the snow filled his mouth and stole his breath. He remained motionless as the cold flakes fell in silent waves. The snowy blanket covered his body, the frozen earth stealing what little heat remained. He raised his head and noticed conforming lines standing out against the random, spiky branches of the leafless trees. He rubbed the snow from his eyes and looked again, pushing himself up until he was on his hands and knees. He stumbled forward until the outline turned into a cabin, much like the first one he found.

The cabin stood in the snowstorm, its chimney a defiant, obscene gesture to the raging elements. One door and one window faced Samuel, just like the other cabin. However, this one seemed a bit larger. He held his hands out, hoping to reach the door before the storm claimed his soul. Samuel staggered forward and fell on the step. He reached up with one hand until he felt the brass knob. The touch jolted him like a bolt of electricity, reminding him that failure to open this door meant a cold, slow death. His right hand seized it, but he could not make his fingers grasp the knob with enough strength to turn it.

He would not consider what would happen if the door was locked. Samuel let his right hand fall, and lunged at the knob with his left. Snow caked his head, and his feet tingled with the itchy pain of frostbite. He felt his fingers claw the knob, grasp it and turn. Without the clinking sound of the opening strike plate, Samuel assumed he was dead, that the door was locked. But his left arm fell at an angle as the door to the cabin swung open. He raised his head and smiled, crawling across the threshold with a final lunge and rolling onto his back. He used an elbow to slam the door shut, and it shook the cabin without a sound. Samuel looked around and closed his eyes. His breathing slowed as relief and exhaustion pulled him into a state of unconsciousness.

\*\*\*

The crackling fire woke him. Samuel heard the hiss and pop before he smelled the rustic aroma of the hearth. He smiled with his eyes closed, savoring the sound and smell, senses he sometimes neglected in life and never would again, thanks to this

place. He'd caught whiffs of scents, but nothing lingered for more than a few moments.

He debated whether or not he was dead. Maybe there was fire. Maybe he was in hell.

Curiosity won the mental duel, and Samuel opened his eyes in the glare of the bright yellow and orange flame. It caught his attention as it did not have the sickly yellow shade of the fire he lit in the forest. He placed a hand over his forehead to shield himself from the unexpected light and blinked like an ascetic emerging from a cave after years of meditation. The warmth relaxed his muscles. As his vision returned, he noticed a fuzzy aura at the edges. He pushed up onto his elbows and looked around the cabin.

The hearth sat inside a black potbelly stove. A single iron pipe ran at an angle from the top and into the brick chimney, which extended up the wall and beyond the ceiling. A saucepan sizzled, with tendrils of enticing steam spiraling away from the stovetop. He turned to see a wooden table with two chairs, one at each end. A napkin holder, candles and steins were set on top. His rucksack sat next to the door, along with a pair of suede boots he did not recognize. Above the boots and suspended by a single iron hook was a long, black, leather trench coat. Samuel smiled, thinking of the futuristic sci-fi heroes laden with enormous weapons.

In the corner sat a single reading chair with swirled sides and brass rivets holding the soft leather tight over the cushions. Samuel thought he could become lost in that chair with the help of a good book and a glass of wine. His eyes moved through the cabin so quickly that he did not notice a thick, plush sleeping bag held his body like a cocoon. He felt his feet. They did not tingle with the burning pain of extreme cold, but rather, his toes wiggled in warm comfort. He glanced at the window next to the door and saw nothing but a charcoal square, as if someone had painted the window to block the outside. Samuel drifted into a deep sleep while the potbelly stove kept him warm.

\*\*\*

He felt the panicky flutter in his chest of awakening in a strange place until he saw the potbelly stove again. Contentment chased away his anxiety until his hunger made itself known. He had eaten little since arriving. Samuel sensed a cellular duty to push sustenance down his throat. He welcomed the hunger pangs and the feeling of being human again, though his brain cautioned him about his temporary euphoria. It reminded him he was in a single-room cabin in the midst of a strange world that was slowly unraveling.

Samuel climbed from the warmth of the sleeping bag, standing naked in front of the fire. He let the heat warm his skin until it hurt, and then a little bit more. His clothes lay draped over the back of one of the chairs, and he decided a meal would take precedence over modesty.

As if the cabin had suspended time while he slept, the pan on the stove continued to sizzle.

"That can only be bacon," Samuel said as he rubbed his hands together and licked his upper lip.

He saw the familiar fatty strips bubbling, crispy at the ends, and he inhaled the aroma until he could almost taste it. Samuel grabbed his shirt and slid it over his head. With his right arm retracted, he used the sleeve to lift the pan off the stove and onto the brick pedestal supporting it. Without waiting for the grease to stop dancing, he

grabbed a slice of bacon and held it in the air in front of his face, cursing the burn on his fingers and blowing on it until he could take a bite. A warm, salty sensation flooded his mouth and he closed his eyes, leaning back against the wall and chewing like a junkie with the needle still protruding from a vein. At first Samuel's stomach lurched. He felt a rumble and heard a gurgle. He paused, and then he devoured the other three strips lying in the grease.

Samuel looked up and noticed a steel decanter hanging from an iron hook just above the stove. It spouted a line of steam into the room, and he cocked his head sideways, trying to remember if it had been there a moment ago. When the heady aroma of coffee beans filled the room, he no longer cared. He stood and grabbed a stein from the small table, pouring the dark coffee from the decanter and watching it form a black center within the silver mug. He brought it to his lips and let the bitter tang flood his mouth. When he was convinced it would not scald his tongue and ruin the taste, Samuel drew the coffee into his mouth and let it warm his chest like a shot of whiskey.

The window remained unchanged. Samuel cupped both hands around the stein to help insulate the beverage and keep it hot as he walked over, expecting to see a brilliant sunrise creeping over the trees like the ones in the movies. But the window remained an opaque, dark hole in the wall. Samuel could almost feel the ominous cloud flowing to the east, toward him, devouring the rest of this broken world in its path.

He frowned and set the stein on the table before looking at it and picking it up again, draining the remnants of the coffee before setting it back down. He noticed the fire did not seem as bright or as warm as when he fell asleep the night before. Had it been the night before? How long had he slept? Before Samuel could consider the answers, he saw it on the floor and it almost stopped his heart.





## Chapter 8

It was impossible. Even in a place where the clouds ate reality and the dead spoke, this was impossible. He blinked, rubbed his eyes and blinked again. It remained.

Samuel crouched down to take a closer look, resisting the urge to pick it up, as if it might shock him or something worse. He closed his eyes, counted to five and opened them. It remained.

He remembered the mother-of-pearl inlay on the narrow handle. He could smell the oil his dad used to protect the blade and keep rust from forming where fingers touched it. He saw the thin, black indentations used for drawing the blades out with the edge of a fingernail. He grasped the pocketknife in his palm and squeezed until he was sure it was real. Memories of that day rushed in.

*"For three hits?"*

*"That's right."*

*"I can do that. We play Penn Hills next week."*

*"No. Not in the season. In one game."*

*Samuel looked at his dad and shook his head back and forth. "Not even Tommy Malone gets three hits in one game."*

*"Then you'll have to be better than Tommy if you want the pocketknife."*

*Samuel shrugged. He pushed the ball cap back on his head and whistled. He checked the little league schedule on the fridge, and ran his finger down the list of under-ten league games until it stopped on April 14, 1979.*

*"Alpine Village. On my birthday. That's the one."*

*His dad raised his eyebrows and nodded.*

*"Danny Cranston plays for Alpine Village. Word has it the kid has a mean curveball."*

*"C'mon, Dad," Samuel said with a smirk. "He's a lefty. I'll see that pitch coming from a mile away. I'm behind on the fastballs, but if he throws that curve, I can pull it to left field. That corner is shallow at Hawkeye Park."*

*Samuel's dad squinted at the schedule.*

*"Didn't notice that. Looks like you play those guys at home."*

*Samuel nodded and crossed his arms.*

*"I think you should tell Mom now. I'm getting that knife."*

Samuel kept his eyes closed and his hands wrapped around the pocketknife. He felt the memory lurch ahead.

*"Let's go, batter," the umpire said, standing behind the catcher.*

*Samuel winked at Tony, the catcher who was crouched low and raising his mitt into the strike zone.*

*"You ain't hittin' Danny's curve," Tony said.*

*"Watch me," Samuel said.*

*The umpire dropped into position. Samuel placed his left foot inside the batter's box and dug the toes on his right cleat into the dirt. He drew the bat back behind his ear, just like his dad drilled into his head during all of those trips to the batter's cages. Samuel noted the runners on second and third and heard the moms cheering. He did his best to block it out and stared hard at Danny Cranston perched on the mound.*

*The first pitch came faster than Samuel expected. It blew past his nose and dropped into Tony's mitt with a snap, followed by the umpire's declaration of a strike.*

*Samuel stepped out of the box and closed his eyes. He thought about his other at-bats. This was his fourth time at the plate and probably his last chance at that third hit of the game. Two singles. Fine. Those were still hits, even if they didn't count as RBIs. A third single was still a hit, too.*

*He moved through the circular practice swing that batters individualize over the course of their baseball careers. Samuel drew the back bat again, and again, Danny brought the heat.*

*"Strike two."*

*Tony snickered from behind his catcher's mask and shook his head at Samuel.*

*"You're chasin' the count now, Sammy. You know he's coming with his curve. Might as well strike out right now."*

*Samuel ignored the comment and moved back into the batter's box. He had Danny Cranston in the palm of his hand.*

*He could tell from Danny's side-arm pitch that the ball was coming from the outside in. Samuel saw the ball rotate in slow motion, the red laces spinning overtop of the white rawhide. As it came closer, Samuel gripped the bat. He brought it a tad higher over his shoulder and then started the swing forward.*

*The contact felt so good it almost made Samuel cry. The baseball shot from the meat of the bat with a satisfying thud.*

*Samuel's eyes drifted up to follow the ball into the summer sky of 1979. He knew he should have been running, but it didn't matter. This swing was a textbook left-field pull, and he knew the ball was headed to the fence, probably over it. Samuel took a stride toward first and dropped the bat into the dirt. He smiled as the ball became a white dot doing its best to escape the atmosphere. The noise of the moment froze into silence, and Samuel imagined the ball whistling through the air like a space rocket.*

*But then it started to drop. That space-bound projectile lost its booster fuel and turned back toward the green outfield at Hawkeye Park. Samuel pushed his walk into a slight jog around first base. The coach was screaming at him to run, but Samuel could not hear him. He jogged toward second base, watching as the left fielder ran to the fence underneath the baseball. The outfielder stopped and raised his mitt over his head. Samuel saw the glove eat the ball a split-second before it cracked the leather and snapped him back into real time.*

*"Out."*

*Before he made it to the second-base bag, Samuel was sobbing. He felt the demeaning glare of every player on the field, every kid on the bench, and every parent watching from just beyond the foul lines. When he reached the bench, he could not even look at his dad. Samuel's chest hitched and heaved as he ended the afternoon going 2-4, and coming up one fly ball shy of a homerun and a third hit in the game.*

Samuel shifted again, sweat building in his palm as he held the artifact from his youth. Those feelings from so long ago had returned.

*"I know, but it was really close. I think it was the only fly ball that kid caught all season."*

*Samuel looked out the window at the suburban world fluttering by at thirty-five miles per hour. He pulled his bottom lip into his mouth with his front teeth.*

*"So where we goin', Dad?"*

*Samuel's father looked up at his son through the rearview mirror of the 1976 El Camino.*

*"Ralph's Army Surplus. I need some things for deer season," he said with a smirk.*

*"It's April."*

*His dad pulled the car into the tight space at the side of the red-brick store. When they entered, Samuel's dad turned right toward the lit glass display case, and Samuel had his hunch confirmed.*

*"Heya, Billy," his dad said.*

*"Yo. Wutch yins lookin' for?" Billy asked.*

*"A pocketknife. Something that'll fit a boy, something he can use to protect himself."*

*Samuel's dad looked down at his son with a wink.*

*"We's got exactly what you need right over here."*

*Billy the clerk waved toward the left end of the glass case, and before he could even begin the sales pitch, Samuel saw it. The knife had both blades extended, fanned out like fingers on a hand. The mother-of-pearl on the handle met the polished silver tips. It was not more than three inches in length, but it was the perfect size for a young man.*

*"Can I see that one, Dad?" Samuel asked.*

*Billy stooped and pulled a ring of keys from his belt. Several clicks and pops later, the back of the display case slid to the right. His disembodied hand reached in and took the knife off the red velour covering the shelf. He stood and closed both blades, then handed it to Samuel's dad.*

*"That model is called 'the Scout,' and it's the last one left. Heard they ain't got no more left in all of Western PA, they been sellin' so good."*

*"How much, Billy?"*

*The clerk looked to the ceiling and rubbed a hand across the stubble on his chin, producing a rat-like scratch.*

*"Listed for fifteen ninety-nine, but I can proolly get it to you for eleven."*

*Samuel's dad reached into his back pocket and removed his wallet. The cracked, brown leather was wrapped around a bulging mass of scrap paper and business cards. He opened it with both hands and used his forefinger to separate the tops of several bills.*

*"Son?"*

*Samuel had not stopped staring at the knife since the moment he saw it on display. All of the kids at St. Bernadette's school had one, except him. They would circle up at recess and pull them out, far away from the eagle-eye vision of the nuns. Sometimes, a boy would unravel a lint-covered, wilting photograph cut from his father's issue of Playboy, and sometimes another would reveal the crumbled remains of a cigarette filched from his mom's soft pack of Marlboro Reds. But most of the time, it was knives.*

*St. Bernadette's and the surrounding public school districts all closed the Monday after Thanksgiving for the first day of deer season. They kept the façade, the idea that most of the male students would go hunting with their fathers that day. But everyone knew the teachers went, too. The pocketknife was the first indication of readiness. Even though Samuel and his chums would not be ready to take the hunter's safety course for another few years, the pocketknife served as public notice that they would.*

*"Samuel," his father said, this time with more force.*

*"Yeah, Dad. That would be awesome. Really cool."*

*His father nodded at the clerk.*

*"Lemme box that for ya."*

*"Can I just put it in my pocket, Dad?"*

*Samuel felt his father's hand ruffle his hair and then move to the middle of his back, where it guided him out of the store. Samuel did not even notice the transaction, the receipt or the small talk between Billy and his father. He gripped the knife in his palm and for the first time, he felt like a man.*

Photographs rolled through Samuel's head – a slideshow of his life. Each one brought a remembrance of the Scout pocketknife and how it had become part of him. Samuel always kept it in his front right pocket, where it clattered together with loose change. Through his early teen years, Samuel kept the knife clean and polished. He maintained the blade and would buff the mother-of-pearl inlay. He remembered losing the knife several times, the last time in college after a night of heavy drinking. He had to scour the basement of a frat house the morning after, in a haze of hangover, stale beer and the occasional used condom. He found it next to the toilet. He rinsed it off in the sink and placed the Scout back in his pocket, where it belonged. The images shot across his mind, some lingering longer than others, until the procession slowed and finally stopped on one. A picture of Samuel in the funeral home, kneeling in front of his father's coffin.

*Samuel looked down at his father's still face.*

*He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see his mother. She held a tissue in both hands, having given up trying to keep her makeup in check. She opened her mouth, but no words came. She shook her head instead and gave Samuel a quick rub on the shoulder before turning to greet another distant relative in town for the funeral.*

*Samuel blocked out the quiet sobbing and muffled laughter of those gathered in the room. He looked again at his dad's face, forever asleep amidst the fragrant, arranged flowers, complete with ribbons strung across the front.*

*"I know you loved John more. It's okay. You didn't know what to do with a son like me. I'm not really sure how you managed. You and Mom struggled to understand what went on in my head, what the hell I wanted from life."*

*He felt himself chuckle and turned to make sure his outburst did not garner attention from the rest of the family.*

*"I mean, even now, with you lying here dead, I don't fit in. Nobody will approach me. But that's fine. I'm not here to mend fences with Uncle Frank. I think you loved me. I mean, you did as any man loves his son, but I think there was a time when it was unconditional. You bought me the Scout. I didn't deserve it. The deal was three hits, and I went 2-4. But you bought it anyway, and you bought it with your poker*

winnings. Mom wouldn't have allowed that purchase to come from the family budget. Don't think I don't know that."

He looked over his shoulder to confirm the chasm of space still existed. None of the relatives would come near the coffin until he finished. None would risk a possible conversation with him.

"I wish we could have had this conversation before cancer got you, but I guess I'll have to settle for it this way. I mean, I need to thank you. If I hadn't been so different than you and Mom, my siblings, I would still be stuck living in the same shit-hole suburb, wasting my life away."

He paused.

"Sorry. Even now, it's hard for me not to take shots."

Several relatives gathered near the table with the photographic collage and other remembrances.

"I'll miss you, Dad. Even after everything we've been through, I'll miss you."

Samuel stood and shoved both hands into his front pockets. His right hand struck his phone and then the Scout. He wrapped his fingers around the pocketknife and held it in his palm. The tears created a wavering last image of his father in the casket.

"I want you to take it with you. You never know when you might need to open a package or cut a string in the afterlife."

Samuel slid his hand into the casket and tucked the Scout underneath the edge of the satin pillow, where the head of his dead father rested.

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Samuel shook his head as if to dislodge the cobwebs gathering inside and licked his lips, which felt dry as petrified wood. He glanced down at his palm and opened it. The knife remained, as real as the fingers grasping it.

Samuel did the only thing he could think of. He placed it in his right pocket, where it sunk into the familiar space. He felt the coolness of the object through thin fabric as it rested against his leg. He stood and used his hand to clear the surface of the window, revealing the original, grey landscape of this place. The snowstorm and all its fury were gone. The ground was dry and he began to wonder if it had happened at all.

He looked around the cabin and noticed it was almost identical to the first cabin. The stove, the food, the coffee, the clothing, the photographs hanging on the wall had all disappeared. Nothing remained but the chair, the table, the hard bunk and a faint smell of burnt coffee beans.

Samuel opened the door and stood on the threshold of the cabin, which faced the western horizon. The advancing cloud loomed overhead, and the landscape sat in soundless solitude. He turned to face the east and recognized the path he hoped would lead to the Barren. He was determined to reach it and survive, unsure if meeting Major there would really matter.

*This cabin is clearly done with me,* he thought.

With his rucksack full of a handful of meager belongings, Samuel set back off upon the path toward the Barren. He hiked for hours around the base of the mountain, putting the second cabin and its memories behind. Every so often, Samuel would thrust his hand into his front pocket and feel the pocketknife nuzzled there. Then he'd shake his head, as though more surprised it remained there than that it appeared in the first place.

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The pale yellow flame caught his eye as it danced silently in the distance. Samuel sensed movement, but could not see anything around it. He hiked the path and realized it was close to night, based on the aches that come after hours of hiking.

The fire grew in size as he got closer. After another hour of hiking, Samuel could discern the hot ash floating upward into the still trees. He saw a campfire and a pack sitting beside a fallen tree. A thin line of rope stretched from one sapling to another, weighted down in the middle by a shirt flipped over the top and dripping water to the ground.

"Anyone here?" he asked as the pack slid from his shoulder. He stretched his arms and looked around the camp. Before he could ask again, a figure pushed through the trees.

"You made it. So glad you didn't veer from the path," Major said.

Samuel cast his eyes down into the fire, avoiding Major's.

"That fire. It makes things worse here."

"I'll take my chances," Major said.

Samuel sighed.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Duty." Major shrugged. "The visitor I expected did not make it."

"What happened to him?" Samuel asked. Major ignored the question and stared into the fire. "I've been hiking all day. Can I rest?" Samuel said.

Major swept his arm across his body and dipped with an exaggerated bow.

"Mi casa, su casa," he said.

Samuel knew what he meant, even if he didn't know how he knew it.

"I'm sure you'll wake me when I need to get up," he said to Major.

"I don't think we have a lot of time to mess around. The cloud is coming east at a good clip. I was worried it might have pulled you under. It can do that, like those huge waves on the Atlantic seaboard. I remember standing in the surf as a kid thinking they weren't so scary, until the current tugged at my ankles on its way back out."

"A few hours?" Samuel asked.

"One or two, if I can keep track. Then we've got to jump back on the path and get to the Barren."

Samuel nodded and rubbed his eyes.

Major watched Samuel fall asleep. He tossed several twigs onto the fire before looking over his shoulder at the massive cloud inching closer.

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Samuel felt a hand shake his shoulder. His leg hurt and he couldn't feel his right foot. He opened his eyes and saw that Major was kicking dirt onto the remaining coals of the fire. It was still dark, as it had been since the sky swallowed the last of the light over the eastern horizon.

"How long?"

Major shrugged. "How long what?"

"How long was I asleep?"

"I'm not really sure. The fire is burning differently now, too. If the reversion is moving at the same pace at the Barren, we may already be too late."

Samuel pulled himself upright and rubbed the pins and needles from his foot. "Too late for what?"

"Too late to slip."

Samuel waited for an explanation. When Major remained silent, he pushed. "What's a slip?" he asked.

"I think we should wait until—"

Samuel slammed his fist into the soft dirt and dry leaves. "I think you need to start filling me in right now. I don't know where the hell I am. I don't know who you are. I don't remember shit. Some things disappear and other things come back."

"What did you say?" Major asked.

"I said you need to start—"

"No," Major said. "What did you say about things coming back?"

Samuel paused, disappointed his tirade had no effect on Major. "A pocketknife."

"From where?"

"From my father's casket, where I left it ten years ago."

Major bent down, his knees creaking. He grabbed Samuel by the shoulders and stared at his face. "Do you still have it?" he asked in a hushed whisper.

Samuel nodded. He reached into his front pocket and gripped the contents. He opened his fist to reveal a paperclip and several coins, but no knife.

"I felt it just before I came into camp," Samuel said, his words trailing as he brushed the dirt and leaves aside, expecting to find his knife where it had fallen from his pocket.

"It's a reflection. It's gone," Major said.

"I had it with me during the hike."

"Are you sure you had it?"

"I don't know," Samuel said. "I guess I'm not sure of much anymore."

Major stood and rubbed his chin. He gathered a few items together and nodded at Samuel, instructing him to do the same.

"I'd feel better if we got moving, put some distance between us and the cloud. We can talk as we go. I'm guessing we're a five- or six-hour hike from the Barren. I can explain a lot before we get there."

Samuel brushed the dirt from his pants and put both hands to his ears as if trying to keep his head together.

"Whatever. I think it would be easier if I just ended it. I'm tired of dealing."

"That's what got you here in the first place."

Those who fell from the noose after a suicide had a certain look about them. After speaking with many people through many reversions, Major could identify them by the look in their eye. The majority of souls in the reversion were suicides and the ones that weren't, like Mara, remained a mystery to Major.

"C'mon, let's move. I still worry the cloud hasn't gotten to all of the wolves yet."

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"Seven."

"You're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not. Seven women."

"At one time?"

Major smiled. The laugh lines in his face told Samuel the man had enjoyed the finer indulgences in life.

"It was mostly me watching, but I jumped in when I could. Needed to recharge the battery a few times. Those little pills sure helped with that. The only problem was getting it back down. That's where the whiskey on the rocks came in handy. I'd wake up and they'd all be gone. It would take my brain thirty or forty seconds to recalibrate,

determine where the hell I was and what happened the night before. I never remembered everything, but enough to know the high-grade call girls don't come cheap, and I'd have some explaining to do to my accountant."

Samuel pushed ahead as the path widened. He came up on Major's right as they curved around the base of the mountain. The path descended with a gentle slope Samuel assumed would empty them into the Barren. Samuel felt a renewed bounce in his step as he let the reversion take a backseat to Major's tale.

"How far back?" he asked Samuel.

"Huh?"

"Childhood? High School? The drug years? How far back do you want me to go?"

"How long until we reach the Barren?" Samuel asked.

"Long enough to get into the good stuff," Major said.

He pushed his headband up on his forehead and looked over a shoulder as if measuring the progress of the cloud advancing from the west.

"The path turns southwest for a bit before straightening out back to the east. Just want you to know I'm not walking us straight into the cloud."

Samuel nodded. He drew a deep breath and exhaled an exaggerated gust of air into the otherwise silent surroundings. "I can't get used to the silence."

Major smiled. He paused for a moment while his brain decided what he would share with Samuel. "We grew up in East Harlem, Spanish Harlem, before Clinton moved his office there and made it trendy again."

Samuel frowned, becoming impatient with his own memory. The names struck a familiar chord, like recognizing the face of a lost acquaintance but not remembering his name. He decided to let Major continue, and he hoped his memory would eventually catch up to fill in the gaps of the world he once knew.

"My dad was a son of a bitch. He'd come home from the corner bar and beat the shit out of my mom. My brother and I, we'd hide under our beds. Not because he didn't know we were there. He knew. We stayed underneath it because he couldn't get his barrel-chest far enough in to grab us. Anyway, my mom was from the barrio, and I don't ever remember finding out how they hooked up. Quite a scene, right? Some pale, red-haired Irishman with a sassy, Latina girl on his arm."

Samuel looked at Major's face and saw the mix of cultures. The man's nose was bulbous and red, but roots of black hair snuck out from under the ponytail.

"By the time I was sixteen, I was running with all the wrong folks. You know the story. We'd break into bodegas and go right for the register. Later on, we'd even take a crack at those little ATMs shoved in the corner of the market. You remember those? The ones that would nail you with a five-dollar fee on top of what your bank would charge?"

Samuel sniffled.

"School sucked, and by the time I was seventeen, I'd had enough of the petty shit. I got greedy, just like everyone else. The subway stop at East 90th would provide us some sweet marks, the assholes that lived on the Upper East Side in their multi-million-dollar townhomes with iron bars on the doors and a blinking security pad at the front. We'd jump 'em and get the cash when they came out of the station. Not sure why so many got out on the wrong side of Broadway, but we'd make the most of it.

"Summer of '88 I headed to the Jersey Shore with the guys in the crew. They had a few dago contacts in Atlantic City getting into the hooker and blow trades. Seemed



like slapping bitches around was easier than risking a cuff in Manhattan. That's when I first realized I had it."

"Had what?" asked Samuel.

"The nose. I could smell deals a mile away. Drug deals at first, which I eventually turned into legit businesses, like used cars."

Major laughed at his own joke. He looked at the confused look on Samuel's face and decided to continue. "I was great at the table games, too. Five- and ten-dollar blackjack led me to the high-roller rooms. I played where winnings came with a chick on your arm and a vial of blow. AIDS was breaking then, but when you're strung out on crack and cards, it's not much of a concern. Not sure how in the hell I escaped that, but I did. You tag so many asses without a jimmy hat, you're rolling the dice.

"I wasn't much of a family man. I mean, I had a wife and kids, but I wasn't part of the family. My money provided housekeepers, pool boys, nannies, whatever we needed, but the money couldn't listen to my wife or help my kids with homework. The family made me legit, somehow gave me the air of a responsible citizen. That's the thing with the white-collar criminals. They sit next to you at the PTA meetings, you see them in the grocery store, you wave at them as they walk their dogs. Hell, some of them even pick up dog shit with a blue plastic bag, yet they were robbing taxpayers blind."

"The bailout?" Samuel asked. His face twisted, as if someone else had used the term.

"Oh, you bet I got a chunk of that. We all did. By the time the mid-2000s rolled around, I had several business holdings in various countries. I had secret offshore accounts and enough capital to pay my mid-managers hundreds of thousands in bonuses. We had holiday blowouts that made the gangster movies look like children's birthday parties. Women everywhere, and not the skanks from the street. I'm talking top-notch girls, good pussy. The kind that makes you forget your name."

Samuel smiled.

"By 2008, I had offices in Manhattan and Newark. Jersey was a dump, but it was easier to hide assets there than it was in the five boroughs. I had departments trading mortgages for years, and we all knew that shit was going to crash. Anyone—including the Fed—that claims they didn't know is a bullshitter. An unspoken panic rippled through our ranks about six months before the shit hit the fan. Guys were getting out fast, selling assets, liquidating the adjustable-rate loans. We all knew those were going to kill us. By the time Goldman Sachs became the media's whipping boy, I had stashed four hundred million I thought would be invisible. That's what I thought."

Samuel noticed a hitch in Major's throat. His pace on the trail quickened as they turned directly into the path of the cloud soundlessly rolling over trees as it approached the east.

"But then a few of my guys turned. They had been working with the FBI the entire time. I had no idea. These were guys that had been with me a long time, going all the way back to our private bordellos and roulette wheels in the shadow of the boardwalk in Atlantic City. These were guys I trusted with my life.

"My wife had left and taken the kids with her by then. My new girl tipped me off. I was shackled up with this broad in one of my Manhattan penthouses. I can't remember exactly how we got together, but she was doing some hardcore porn at the time. I saw her in a film and knew I wanted a piece of that ass. Anyways, she rang my cell about 11:30 in the morning, which I knew was trouble because she never got out of bed

before noon. She told me the Feds had been there and were on their way to my office. She said they had warrants and paperwork and all the bullshit they needed to put me away for a long time.”

Samuel stopped. As the path curved to the right and descended down the gentle slope of the mountain, he saw the tops of several cabins. They looked exactly like the others, and the curvature of the land would no doubt reveal more as they approached. Major followed Samuel’s gaze.

“Yep. That’s it. The Barren. We still got another hour to reach it.”

“So what did you do when the cops arrived?” Samuel asked.

“I had to take care of things before they did. There was no way I was going to rot in a cell, become Bubba’s girlfriend. I couldn’t do that. Plus, the lead prosecutor was a dickhead from way back. In fact, I think I may have jumped him in a subway station, back in the day.

“After I got the call, I went to a hidden panel in my office. I didn’t even have time to open the safe. Even if I did, what was I going to do? They were coming. I couldn’t find the bullets to the revolver under my desk, so I pushed through a drawer of sex toys until I found the velvet rope. I had glass walls in my office that gave you a stunning view of Manhattan. That turned the ladies on, and they’d even let me tie them up. Some of those lays got crazy.

Anyway, I stood on a chair and pushed the ceiling tile to the side. With the rope in one hand, I tossed it over a steel beam. The end came back to my other hand, and by that time I could hear them coming. The private elevator dinged a single tone. Footsteps in the marble foyer. If I had more time, who knows? I might have reconsidered. But I didn’t. I tied a knot at the top underneath the beam and took the other end and twisted it around my neck. I wasn’t schooled in the knot-tying, Boy Scout bullshit, so I triple looped it just to make sure it wouldn’t give. I remember standing on the chair with that noose around my neck, and I was laughing. Maybe it was the absurdity of it all, or maybe I had lost my mind by that point.

“The door to the waiting room slammed against the wall, which meant the raid was seconds from reaching me. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and leapt off the chair. I think they came through at the same time, because I remember someone shouting and I felt hands grasping my legs. But they were too late. Those knots held better than they were supposed to because they snapped my neck.”

Samuel stopped walking and turned to face Major. He shook his head and coughed. “Is that all you remember?”

Major shook his head. “I remember waking up at the foot of a tree. I remember looking around and seeing other ropes hanging from branches and dangling next to streamers of yellow caution tape.”

“You woke up here, in this place?” Samuel asked.

“Not far from your swingin’ tree, my friend. But it wasn’t my first rodeo. I quit counting how many times I’ve dropped from that cursed tree.”



## Chapter 9

Samuel peered down the path at the Barren. He saw three cabins. Although not identical to the two he already discovered, they looked the same.

Major led them through towering trees and into the valley. He had gone quiet since finishing his story, and Samuel wondered if the retelling put an emotional drain on the old man. Major looked over his shoulder as he walked, measuring the pace of the cloud as it approached from the west.

Samuel could see two people at the Barren, but they were still too far away for him to make out features. The shapes appeared to be gathering things off the ground.

"A week, maybe two."

The comment caught Samuel by surprise. He stopped walking and shifted his weight to one hip, waiting for Major to elaborate. When he didn't, Samuel spoke.

"Until the cloud arrives? Until this, uh, reversion gets here?"

Major didn't answer. He kept maneuvering down the path, stepping over jagged rocks and debris, trying not to twist an ankle in the process.

Samuel followed Major. As they approached the Barren, the shapes began to take form, a man and a woman. He noticed the eyes first. It wasn't their gazes so much as the hurt behind them. Samuel shivered and felt an ache in his heart. The woman appeared to be in her twenties, thin yet magnetic. He imagined she was once an actress or possibly a singer. She had scraggly, black hair that hadn't been washed in days. Remnants of makeup were brushed across her face in random places. Eye shadow ran down her cheeks like cracks in a porcelain cup. She held her lips together, creating the single line of her mouth. The woman's pointy nose sat in perfect symmetry with the rest of her face. Samuel flushed, realizing he had been staring longer than was socially acceptable. He looked at the ground and then back up at the woman—this time, his eyes locked on her neck. Underneath her jaw and across her collarbone was a diagonal black bruise. The discolored skin made a line toward her heart, and the bruise looked recent, but not fresh.

The man stepped in front of the woman and broke Samuel's gaze. He sneered at Samuel and shook his head. "Who's this?" he asked, directing his question at Major.

Major walked up and placed a hand on the man's shoulder. He smiled. "It's speeding up, Kole."

The man shook his head and nodded his chin toward Samuel, who stood behind and to the right of Major.

"Find him in Aokigahara?"

"Yeah," Major said. "He landed in the Sea of Trees, like the rest of us."

"We don't need his help," Kole said.

The woman stared at the top of the path, through Samuel, as though he didn't exist.

"Posturing," Major said. "He's trying to act like a tough guy."

Samuel watched as Kole put his hands on his hips. His dark, rich hair crept far enough down on his forehead that it could have been fake. He wore a tattered, white T-shirt that accentuated the taut muscles underneath. A black belt fastened black jeans on his slender waist. Black leather completed the outfit. A sleeve of tattoos full of cryptic symbols and half-naked women circled his right arm, and a needle track ran up his left. The top three punctures sat atop a blue, swollen vein that oozed pus. Two red lines bisected both of his earlobes where earrings once hung.

"We're wasting time. Did you find anyone who can slip?" the woman asked Major, indicating Samuel could not be the man for the job.

"I was hoping someone else would here, at the Barren."

"Well, nobody's here but us," Kole said. He kicked at the dirt with the toe of his boot.

The woman stepped past Kole and Major until she stood face-to-face with Samuel. He caught a whiff of vanishing fragrance, masked by natural body oils, and then it scuttled off, leaving the vacant emptiness of this place with its silent stillness. He felt her eyes latch onto him again, and he could not turn away. Samuel's mouth went dry, and he felt a tingling in his feet.

"What's yer name?" she asked.

"Samuel."

The woman nodded. "I'm Mara. That charmer over there is Kole."

Samuel dropped his head to Mara and then turned to look at Kole.

"He's a dick. You'll get used to it."

Kole glared at Mara. "Fuck you," he said. "And fuck you." He pointed at Samuel.

Major laughed, tossing his head back and grabbing his abdomen with both hands.

"Kids, kids, stop. You'll have time for your schoolyard scraps tonight. For now, we need to get our supplies in order. Kole, make sure we have enough wood. You know how hard it is to maintain a fire here. Mara, get the gruel going. I think it's been days since Sammyboy here ate, and he's going to start feeling it soon."

Kole waved a hand at Mara and Samuel. He shuffled past the cabin and toward the edge of the tree line.

"Whatever you say, old-timer. Apparently someone put you in charge when we weren't paying attention."

Major smiled and put his arm around Samuel. Mara turned and headed into one of the cabins, shutting the door behind her.

"You and I need to examine some things, see if we can punch a hole in this place. Based on the speed of the death cloud over there, we're running out of time."

Samuel shook his head, trying to use the physical motion to make sense of the situation. After several more attempts, he realized it wasn't working.

"We have to get out of here," he said.

Major turned and looked at the cloud, then toward the cabin with Mara, then beyond the path to where Kole was picking up firewood.

"Without a doubt," he said.

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Major poured the steaming liquid into a filthy clay mug, where it bubbled with a light froth.

"Drink," he said to Samuel.

Samuel sniffed the mug and wrinkled his nose. "A hint of licorice?" he asked. "I hate licorice."

"It's one of the few things in this place you'll still taste. That's gotta be better than a colorless, bland drink."

Samuel shrugged and sipped. The tea burnt his lip and caused him to inhale.

"I want you to try something," Major said.

Samuel set the mug on the table. He looked through the greasy window of the cabin and saw Kole and Mara arguing with each other. Mara thought they should be cautious with Samuel while Kole agreed with Major's plan of testing Samuel's abilities in the reversion.

"What are they doing?"

Major grabbed Samuel's right wrist with his left hand. "I need you try something."

Samuel nodded.

"There's a man who might be trapped in the ether. It's a nowhere place, a void. He might have the ability to punch a hole in this place."

"Slip."

"That's right," Major said. He let a smile creep into the corners of his mouth.

"We can slip into another place. That's not to say we escape the existence and go home. That might be lost forever. You know that, right? Mathematically speaking, odds are you'll never see that place again."

"Now you're a statistician?" Samuel asked.

Major released Samuel's wrist and rocked back on his chair. "When you've sat at as many table games as I have, you get to know the odds." Major continued, not allowing Samuel the time to respond. "This guy may be able to punch the hole if he's not damaged."

"Damaged like us?"

Major laughed.

"Yeah, like that. Let's hope he doesn't swan dive from the top of a skyscraper or shove the end of a shotgun in his mouth. That's what I call damaged."

Samuel looked at Major, not sharing in his lighthearted giggles.

"Is this hell? Are we dead?"

"Depends on how you define 'hell' and what you mean by 'dead'," Major said.

Samuel fought to remain focused on the conversation. He felt like his head was buzzing with thoughts he couldn't quite catch.

"What do you want me to try?" he asked.

Major raised one hand and let it fall to the table. "I almost forgot."

He turned as Kole entered the cabin, followed by Mara. They stood shoulder to shoulder and leaned against the cabin wall. Major looked at them, and then back to Samuel.

"I'm going to put you in someone else's head and see if you can get out. You good with that?"

"He's a fucking newb," Kole said.

Mara was shooting Kole red-hot daggers. She pushed a lock of hair behind one ear. "Give him a chance," she said.

Major looked at Kole and Mara, waiting in silence for them to finish their verbal sparring. "Are you ready?" he asked Samuel.

Samuel nodded. Major looked at his clothes, his eyes pausing on the silver charm resting on Samuel's chest. He wanted to yank it and run, testing the amulet himself to see if it was the talisman that would get him out of the reversion. But Major knew he had to let Samuel prove he could slip before he made a play for the talisman.

"Close your eyes," he said to Samuel. "If you get in deep shit we'll yank you back."

*The cabin disintegrated and the accelerated rush of lights filled Samuel's vision. He looked up and to the right and saw the reflection of his own eyes, but they were not his. He noticed large red eyebrows on pasty skin and touched a finger to a widow's peak that retreated back toward thinning, red hair tainted with gossamer strands of silver. His hands gripped the steering wheel of an Italian sports car as it blew past the other cars in the right lane of the expressway.*

*Samuel looked to his left and was met with a darkened reflection of someone else's body. It appeared to be mid-forties, paunchy and pampered. The silk tie sat askew on his collar, while a diamond stud penetrated his left ear. The whine of the engine caught Samuel's attention as the speedometer pushed past ninety-five on the gauge. Rain fell in large, loud drops and obscured the dividing line on the pavement.*

"Death wish," Samuel said.

Major looked at Samuel, his eyes closed and his palm wrapped around the ignition key with the blood draining from his fingers.

"Do you know where you are?" Major asked.

"In a car, on a highway."

Before Major could reply, a force snapped Samuel back into the shell occupying the driver's seat.

*He saw the glow of brake lights ahead, like the eyes of angry monsters. Samuel caught a glimpse of the approaching off-ramp in the interval between windshield-wiper swipes. He guided the car onto the shoulder amidst the sound of horns trailing off behind him. Samuel turned the wheel to the left and pulled his foot off the accelerator, bringing the car into a controlled fishtail on the rain-slicked pavement. He pushed the flashy BMW to its limits. He snapped the wheel into the turn and straightened the vehicle out as it approached a congested intersection trapped within four walls of suburban, strip-mall hell.*

"Running it into a wall or bridge?" Kole asked.

Major shook his head. "No. He's headed somewhere. The driving is reckless, but that's the emotional state. He has other plans."

*Samuel felt the car lurch as he downshifted from second to first gear. His breathing felt shallow and rapid as the adrenaline heightened his senses. He followed the flow of traffic while checking his rearview for flashing lights. It would be miles before they caught up, and even then they wouldn't know which exit he had taken. Samuel made several turns, until he passed the sparkling new sign for Golden Meadow development. Samuel slowed down and drove through the gate and into the private community.*

*He turned through several streets designed after the old, inner-ring suburbs of the twentieth century, complete with tree lawns, sidewalks and street lamps. Samuel spun the wheel into the slick, wet asphalt driveway at 1329. His plump finger reached up to the sunshade and punched the button that opened the double-car garage. Samuel pulled the car into the silence so the rain could no longer pummel the roof. With the*

*car's engine idling in neutral, Samuel hit the button again, which dropped the garage door behind him.*

*He sat in the front seat as the song on the CD player came to an end. Samuel let the song fade before hitting the power button. As if in cosmic alliance, the overhead light of the garage-door opener clicked off, leaving him blinded by the reflected rays coming from the car's headlights. He slammed that button too, sitting in complete darkness. Samuel's ears adjusted as he heard renegade raindrops crashing into the steel roof of the garage, while the engine continued to idle in neutral.*

Mara stood behind Samuel with her arms crossed while Kole stared at Major. Both of them were becoming agitated with Major's test of Samuel, what he called a "test slip." As long as Samuel had a talisman, he would be able to invade the soul of another in a different universe—and those in the reversion with him could watch it as if the entire experience was being broadcast over closed-circuit television. A test slip was temporary but the effects were not. Although nobody but Major saw this happen in a prior reversion, he made it clear that dying in the inhabited soul during a test slip meant dying in the current reversion as well. This was a dead-end in the cycle, not an escape from it. For Kole and Mara, losing Samuel during Major's test would mean the end of any hope. Major knew it as well but he had to be certain Samuel could return on his own.

"He can't do it. I told you he can't. Pull him out," Kole said.

Mara looked at Samuel and then to Major. "Kole's right. Pull him before it's too late. You know he can slip."

Major shook his head. "No, I need to know if he can get back on his own."

Mara huffed. "No you don't. That doesn't matter. *Pull him.*"

"I'm not watching this," Kole said. He opened the door and walked from the cabin into the eternal dusk of the locality.

"Do it or I'll cut him right now."

Mara pulled a knife from her hip and placed it on Samuel's throat.

"Is that a threat?" Major said.

"Yes," Mara said.

Major rubbed a hand on the stubble covering his chin. He chuckled and shook his head.

"I woulda spanked your ass back in the day. Taught you some manners, missy."

Mara opened her mouth slightly, hesitated, then closed it. She narrowed her eyes without taking them off Major.

"Go," he said with the wave of a hand. "Go in and pull him out of there."

*Samuel felt his head become lighter, as if he were swimming in ether. He turned the CD player on again and it kicked back around to the first track. Samuel felt the guitar waver through the air and he reached out, almost touching the notes. The engine ran with a smooth, steady purr.*

*Samuel tilted his head back until it struck the headrest. He looked at the dull reflection of this other body in the driver's side window. He saw the eyelids drooping and felt a heavy sleep pushing him down into the leather seat. Samuel blinked and closed these eyes. He could feel the sounds of the car slipping away in the distance, surrounded by the comforting silence.*

*He felt the car shake and opened one eye. Another shake came along with a muffled thump.*

*"Samuel."*

*He opened both eyes, and a shiver ran across his neck and down his spine. A woman stood on the other side of the glass, pounding it with the meat of her fist. Her jet-black, shoulder-length hair fell across her face. Thin eyebrows narrowed and came together at the top of her thin, pointy nose. Samuel followed the lines of her high cheekbones.*

*"Samuel."*

*This time he heard it clearly and knew the woman called his name. He searched in his mind for her name but couldn't unlock the mystery. Samuel's mouth was dry, and a dull ache grew from the back of his head, coming forward like a storm cloud.*

*"Mara?" He heard himself ask.*

*She smiled and said one word. "Duck."*

*A second later, a red brick crashed through his window. Mara took a step forward, reached through the gaping hole and unlocked the power doors. She took another step forward and yanked open the door. Samuel sat there with a grin, amused at the amount of activity around him. Mara turned the ignition off with one hand and slapped the button on the garage door opener with the other. Cool, moist air flooded the garage, and the carbon monoxide oozed into the night. She reached down and released the seatbelt holding Samuel tight.*

*"C'mon. Let's go."*

*Samuel tilted his head sideways like an old drunk. He grinned again and slapped one knee.*

*"Not sure how I got here, but thanks for helping me out." He slurred the words at her.*

*"Major got an opening, but I don't know how long it'll last. I don't even know if it's going to bring us back to that place. But there's no time to discuss it. Let's go."*

*Mara turned, and Samuel stared at her lithe form as she walked toward the open garage door. He saw the way her hair rested on the black biker jacket, the chains and zippers glistening like miniature serpents on her back. He followed the coat where it stopped, at the base of her spine. Samuel gawked at her well-proportioned legs, which looked utterly smooth in the tight leather pants, as if she wore an outfit of crude oil.*

*"Damn."*

*Mara turned and shook her head. She grabbed Samuel's arm so hard it made him wince, dragging him upright and tossing his upper body toward the open door. She blew past him with a blur of black and a hint of perfume.*

*"Around back and through the tree line," she said.*

*Samuel stumbled behind her as Mara bolted down the driveway and to the gate between two segments of chain-link fence. She flipped the horseshoe up and pushed the gate open, running down the sidewalk and past the gas grill to the fence stretching across the rear of the yard. She stopped and turned to face Samuel, her face appeared to be floating amidst a sea of darkness. Towering trees silhouetted against the rainy night sky swayed above as if daring entry. She waited another second and then motioned for him to hurry before leaping over the fence. Samuel watched as she swung both legs to one side and vaulted over the top. He smiled again before he*



doubled over with a fit of coughs. The more he hacked, the less air made it to his lungs. Tears filled his eyes and mixed with the steady drizzle on his face.

"Get up," she said.

Samuel rolled over and clawed at the manicured grass with both hands until he felt the cold metal of the fence. He climbed up the links until the top rail was at his waist. He swung one leg up and over the rail and let gravity take over, bringing Samuel crashing over and into a pile of wet leaves. Before he could cry out, Mara was moving again, running between the trees.

He stumbled forward until another round of coughing arrested his lungs. He collapsed and looked back at the house. Red and blue lights appeared, splashing the white siding with resplendent color. A back porch light came on, as did the house lights of several neighbors.

"Get up."

Mara broke him from his gaze and he scrambled upright and followed her path. The bark of a dog and a bleating car horn reminded him he was running through a copse of trees separating two streets of a modern neighborhood. He ripped the tie from his neck and focused on the light reflecting from Mara's wet leathers.

Shouts broke through his hazy head as dark figures burst into the backyard like a black avalanche. He put his hand to his forehead to try to ease the pain. Samuel felt as though a tank had taken a detour through his skull.

"I can almost see the cabin," Mara shouted.

He followed her farther, until he saw it as well. Samuel rubbed his eyes, turning to look at the flurry of activity coming their way, and then back to Mara. She was there. It was there.

Mara bolted for the door. She lunged and grabbed the doorknob in one motion.

"C'mon, it only stays open for a second."

Mara waited, breathing heavily and looking from side to side.

Samuel slowed to a trot and placed his hands on his hips. "The cabin?" he asked.

"If you don't step through here with me, you will die."

Samuel shook his head. He looked down at his clothes, held a hand up to his face. "This ain't me. I'm dreaming or something."

Mara bit her bottom lip. She let go of the doorknob and walked toward him. "I want to show you something."

Her voice dropped as though she were breathing the words. A hand came up and stroked the side of Samuel's face. His eyes met hers and his breath hitched as he tried to encourage his lungs to work while keeping his heartbeat in check. Mara took his hand and turned toward the door of the cabin. She looked over one shoulder and smiled at him. She winked.

Samuel allowed her to lead this foreign body to the threshold of the door. He no longer cared about the pursuers. He no longer heard the manhunt emerging a few hundred yards from the tree line.

"Damn. Yeah, sure I'd like for you—"

Before he could finish, Mara's knee drove upward into Samuel's groin. Colors exploded in his vision, and before he could cry out, he felt the sickening crunch of her fist smashing the cartilage in his nose.

Mara opened the door and dragged his bleeding and disoriented body through with her.

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"Reckless."

"Aren't we all?"

Kole stood with both hands wrapped around a mug. He sipped and smirked while tattoos stretched across his bulging muscles.

"The other guy still trapped in the ether?"

Major didn't reply and Kole shook his head.

"So now we know Samuel can slip, but we don't know if he can do it alone.

Pointless."

Major shook his head. "He can," he said.

"You don't know that," Mara said.

Mara wanted to believe Samuel could slip, that he could transport them out of this universe and into one that wasn't eating itself, but the only sure way of knowing would be to try.

Samuel stirred. His mouth opened and closed as he grimaced in unspoken pain.

"Worse than a hangover," Kole said, before returning to his tea.

Major shrugged and walked over to Mara. The cabin felt cramped and suffocating. "You volunteered to go get him. Kole would have done it."

Mara ran a hand through her stringy, greasy hair. She took a deep breath and exhaled over her bottom lip. Even the short amount of time she spent in the test slip was enough to muddy her thoughts and upset her stomach.

"Yeah. I did."

Major reached out and tapped her shoulder with his fingers. "Deep breaths. You're here."

"Right," she said, shrugging off his hand like a renegade snowflake. "I'm back here, safe and sound, in this shithole that's getting eaten by the cloud, with you three assholes."

Kole laughed into his mug, sending drops of tea to the floor.

"Where am I?" Samuel asked.

Major turned away from Mara and sat on the chair next to him. Samuel's legs moved beneath the rough, wool blanket like two monsters prowling the depths of the ocean.

"Back. In this place. Against the odds," Major said.

Cramps gripped Samuel's stomach, and the meager light from the fire hurt his eyes. "Right. That explains it," he said.

Kole grinned and walked around the other side of the cabin to face him. "I don't know what the old man or the little girl have been telling you, champ, but you ain't ever going home. Once you slip, you're done."

"Don't listen to him," Mara said. "He's a cynical dickhead."

"I'm honest. Tell him, Major. Tell him what you know. He deserves to understand the situation, just like we did."

Samuel sat up as fireworks exploded behind his forehead. His tongue felt like a ball of yarn inside his mouth. Mara returned from the edges of his vision carrying a cup, presumably one with more of the licorice tea. Samuel accepted it from her, his hunch confirmed.

"I wasn't in my body, but I was back in the real world."

Major sighed and looked at Kole, and then Mara. They waited, neither speaking nor moving.

"We thought we could rescue that man, but we couldn't. We're on our own. You were in him, and he was determined to find a gruesome end. He probably did, once Mara pulled you back."

Samuel nodded at Mara. "It looked like the world I remember."

"Yes, it probably did," Major said. "But if you had been a kind of tourist, you probably would have discovered minor anomalies with that place. French fries may not exist there, or Jimmy Page may have been a founding member of Black Sabbath."

"Does this have something to do with the parable you told me when we first met? Something about the lion and its different parts?" Samuel asked.

He struggled to recall the earlier conversation through the pain in his head. Major looked at Mara and Kole. Mara nodded, and Kole threw an arm into the air.

"Tell him, old man."

Major squared up to Samuel and spoke inches from his nose. "What's the first thing you remember from this place?"

Samuel looked at the ceiling. Bits of memory had come back, especially when he was able to hold reflections, like the picture on the wall and his pocketknife. Without the physical prompt, he struggled again.

"I remember dropping from the tree. Someone tried hanging me, I guess."

Kole whistled and shook his head, amused.

"Someone hanged you?" Major asked, his voice prodding into Samuel's memory.

"Or maybe you were trying to get off by yourself. What do they call it? Autoerotic asphyxiation?"

Kole laughed, but Mara stayed quiet.

Samuel's face glazed over. He looked to Kole and then back to Major. "Suicide? You think I was committing suicide?"

"Kole tried, as did I. Mara hasn't been able to unlock her memory. If you can, that would mean three of the four of us ended up here as a result of a suicide attempt."

Samuel's hand came up to his throat and he remembered the bruises. He looked at Major's neck.

"I remember the circumstances, and I think you will too, eventually," Major said.

"Yeah, just in time for the cloud to eat us all," Kole said.

"Can you shut up for more than three minutes at a time?" Mara asked.

Kole shrugged and went back to the stove to pour himself another mug of tea.

"So we slipped in the process and ended up here in this place," Samuel said. "And the reversion is eating it, and it's coming toward us."

"Don't forget that we don't know if we can all slip, and if we can, we don't know what we're slipping into or if we can get back. Could be a world of blind supermodels where you're the only guy, or it could be a dark, empty world getting eaten by a black cloud."

Major glared at Kole. "We seem to be in a holding tank of some kind."

"What about the wolves? What happened to them?" Samuel asked.

"I don't know," Major said. He trailed off, but with a thin veneer of truth covering his words.

Samuel opened his mouth to ask about the other spirit he encountered on his way to the Barren, but then he reconsidered. Mara read the look on his face.

"What? Is there something else?" she asked.

Samuel shook his head and turned back to Major. "So how do we get out?"

"I hoped the man you slipped into had the answer. But he doesn't," Major said. "The solution must come from within these walls."

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Samuel watched Mara move about the Barren. She walked with a determined grace, as if every step had its own purpose. He followed her to the tree line, where she gathered sticks for kindling, snapping the twigs to place them in a bag.

"Need some help?" he asked.

Mara shrugged without lifting her head from the forest floor. Samuel approached, bending down to pick up pieces of broken branches.

"So you don't remember how you got here?"

Mara spun on him, her eyes glaring with untold emotion. Her nostrils flared and she closed her eyes. Samuel watched the surge pass. Mara opened her eyes.

"No. No, I can't remember," she said.

"Did you go to your senior prom?"

Mara stopped and made eye contact with Samuel. A slight smile forced the corners of her mouth up.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"Prom. Did you go?"

"Yes."

Samuel let the one-word reply hang in the silence.

"Did you?" she asked.

"Not my own. I was too cool. Spent the night sitting in the woods with my other loser buddies, a case of beer and a bag of weed. Had a girlfriend a few years younger when I was in college. Ended up going to her prom at my old high school when I was twenty-one. My younger brother was in her class, so I was at their senior prom three years after not going to my own."

Mara waited until she was sure Samuel finished recounting his experience.

"That's pathetic," she said, her face relenting with a reluctant smile.

Her comment brought another wave of recollection from Samuel. He brushed past the light banter and dug deeper into his patchwork of memory. "I know I had a wife, but that's about it. I mean, I saw the picture on the wall, the 'reflection,' as Major calls them. I knew that was my wife, but I don't remember anything. I couldn't remember the name of the thing that sparked fire when I first woke up here."

"A lighter," Mara said.

"Yeah, a lighter. So I get these bursts of memory, but it's more like being asleep on a train. The ones I can remember now are only snippets of my life."

Samuel waited. Mara looked at him and shook her head.

"The fire is probably low. Let's get this back to the cabin," she said.

Samuel followed her, watching her hips sway with every step. Mara's feet appeared to glide across the organic debris on the forest floor. Before she opened the door, he spoke.

"There's something he isn't telling me."

Mara turned to face him. She dropped the sack of kindling next to the door and put her hands on her hips.

"And there's something you're hiding, too," she said.

She stepped toward him and turned her worried eyes up to his face. "I don't know where we are. I don't know what this place is, and I'm not sure I even want to return to

my locality. It's not likely that would happen anyway. But this reversion will wipe us from existence, and I don't want to be here when it does."

Mara stepped around Samuel and pointed to the west, where the pulsing, dark cloud loomed higher in the sky. "You see that? It's coming for us, and when it does, we're finished."

"Major knows how to get out of here? Is that why you're at the Barren?"

"I'm at the Barren because the Barren is the only place to be. I know you've met our friends the wolves, and I'm not convinced they've been sucked up by the cloud. So if you have doubts about this place or us, there's the path." Mara pointed at the narrow trail leading to the tree line and to the west.

"I don't trust any of you, and whatever it is you need me to do to get out of here ain't gonna happen until Major or you, or the dickhead, levels with me."

Mara huffed and looked over her shoulder. Samuel nodded and picked up the bag of firewood before opening the cabin door.



## Chapter 10

The rain came like a cruel, silent invader. It fell from the sky in glistening waves that obscured the tops of the trees, swallowing the light. Major, Kole, Mara and Samuel sat on the floor of the cabin watching the dwindling supply of kindling burn down into anemic, yellow flames. Samuel could not remember when the rain began or how long it continued. The lack of natural light combined with the quickening reversion hampered his ability to judge time. He recalled two fits of sleep on the hard, wooden floor, where he thrashed and awoke achy, a prisoner of fitful dreams just beyond his grasp. He remembered the image of a train moving on a track in the most desolate place his head could conjure. But the vision disappeared before he could recall it. Major rationed the remaining crackers from his rucksack. Samuel was thankful the odd locality made sustenance less of a survival necessity.

"Look."

Mara's silhouette cut a shape in the greasy window next to the door. Kole huffed and waved a hand while Major and Samuel craned their necks forward, seeing nothing but the back of her head.

"What's that?" she asked.

Samuel stood and bent down to look through the pane of glass Mara had cleared with her sleeve. She managed to push the grime across the surface with enough force so they could see out of it. They both stood, staring into the black abyss.

"I can't see anything," Samuel said.

"You have to wait for the lightning," she said.

"Lightning?" Major asked. "When did that begin?"

"It caught my eye a few hours ago. Of course, no thunder coming with it, but the lightning came, and each flash drenched that black place with a burst of light."

Samuel looked at Major, and then back to Mara. Kole continued to sit on the floor, using his finger to draw concentric circles in the dust.

"There."

Major shook his head in frustration as he looked outside a second too late, but Samuel saw it. At first, he chuckled to himself. He held his breath, withholding judgment until he could take a better look. What felt like hours passed before the next strike, but Samuel was ready. His initial curiosity washed away with the surging rain.

The bright bolt illuminated a form standing twenty yards from the cabin, facing east. Samuel kept telling himself it was an ape, but he knew better. Mara reached down and grasped his hand, squeezing hard. She continued to stare out the window, her breathing erratic and muffled.

"Did you see it?" she asked.

Samuel gave her hand a return squeeze and looked at Major.

"I did," Samuel said.

The storm tossed another round of lightning down from the sky. Samuel wondered whether the dark cloud eating this place sent the storm or if it happened naturally.

Either way, the darkness and the downpour seemed to conspire against his sanity. The concurrent blasts of soundless light fastened to the shape like a spotlight.

Samuel held that image in his mind like a photograph, a single frame of time frozen in memory. The rain matted the man's hair to his head, covering the gray, exposed scalp. Water dripped at an angle as it ran from his chin. Ragged flaps of flesh lay exposed on the man's face, bloodless and rotten. Samuel noticed the man wore tattered remnants of clothing that fell in strips about his body. His arm jutted inward at an unnatural angle. Artifacts of pants came toward the ground to meet bare feet that sank into the cold mud left exposed by the melting snow. Nothing on the creature mattered to Samuel more than its eyes. Samuel looked into the lifeless, black orbs and felt a whimper crushed within his chest.

"Who could it be?" Mara asked.

Another round of bolts crashed through the forest as Major stood. He looked over Mara's tousled, black hair at Samuel.

"There's more."

Samuel heard the words enter his ears as if they came from outside of his own head. He shuddered and felt the muscles in his abdomen cramp. He could no longer feel Mara's vise grip on his fingers.

Two more stood behind the first.

"Are they people?" Mara asked, still hopeful in her heart, but not in her mind.

"They used to be," Major said.

Samuel looked at him, tilting his head to one side, awaiting elaboration.

"When I first saw them, I thought they were reflections, but they're not. When they appear, the wolves get real skittish."

"Undead?" Samuel asked.

"That's one way to describe them. I think they're more like warnings. They come just before the final phases of reversion. Canaries in the coal mine."

"Ha," Kole said, still sitting on the floor drawing in the dust. "Zombie birds."

Mara crinkled her face and shook her head at Kole.

"What do they do?" Samuel asked.

"Not sure," Major said, shaking his head. "I've only come across them a few times. They don't do much but draw more of their kind, like moths to the flame."

"For fuck's sake, dude. Are they canaries or are they moths?" Kole asked. "Tell it like it is, and quit being a fucking drama queen."

"He's just trying to explain what's happening, you asshole."

The outburst from Mara grabbed Samuel's attention. He saw her shake her head and heard Kole laugh in response.

"It doesn't matter, does it, hon? This place is heading to the shitter with zombie tour guides. Your prince charming there can slip, but he's got no way of controlling it and we don't know if he can do it without us. Probably has a small pecker, too."

Samuel shifted and turned his shoulders toward Kole.

"Everyone quiet down." Major rubbed his forehead, trying to think and de-escalate the situation at the same time.

"Tell the bitch to quit her yapping," Kole said.

Samuel took a step toward him, and Kole stood at the same time. The men faced each other, nose to nose. Kole flexed his biceps.

"Go ahead, Sammy. You want a crack at me, go ahead."

Samuel balled both fists. He had eased the right one back to his hip when he felt Mara grip his wrist.

"Let it be. Don't give the prick the fight he wants. Save your strength."

Samuel looked into Mara's eyes, and his fingers eased back from inside his palms. He shook his head at Kole, who hadn't moved.

"Why here?" Samuel asked Major as he stepped away from the confrontation. Kole winked at Mara, and she glared back.

"It could be that the Barren draws them somehow, like magnets. It drew us here, didn't it?"

"You told me to come here," Samuel said.

Major shrugged. "Semantics. You would have ended up here, regardless."

"What do we do?" Mara asked.

"There isn't much we can do. Nobody is planning a Sunday hike any time soon. We stay here for now."

"Genius," Kole said.

"Man, you're not helping," Samuel said, snapping.

"Look," Mara said.

In the flashes of electricity filling the sky, the handful of motionless figures had turned into dozens.

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Although Major passed through many reversions, he did not have a memory of the horde and did not remember their function, which was to keep the talisman from being used and to immobilize anyone who could use it.

As the undead stood shoulder to shoulder, surrounding the cabin, Major ordered a watch. Samuel and Mara agreed, while Kole refused to cooperate. His dust drawings had evolved into charcoal portraits, which he drew on the walls using the ash from the fire. During Major's shift, Samuel felt the pull of sleep. He curled into a ball with his head on the hardwood floor. The image of a train returned as a new dream seeped into his subconscious.

*The track extended to the horizon in one long, loping stride. It curled like a tail around to the east, where the setting sun tore a flaming path in the sky on its descent in a bizarre retrograded motion. A wind moaned outside the cabin car, the noise signifying to Samuel that he was dreaming. The landscape lay as a flat expanse with an occasional pile of scree left like crumbs on a table. The dream-world contained no trees or manmade structures as far as Samuel could see.*

*He turned his dreaming eye inward to the passenger cabin. Two rows of seats sat divided by an aisle, two chairs in each row. The dark cloth on the seats hid stains left by thousands of riders covering thousands of miles. Samuel looked up and noticed a single, glowing bulb above his seat. The car rattled and hitched as the train pulled it through a slight curve in the track, still bearing east on its unknown, eternal voyage.*

*"I'm not leaving here."*

*Samuel turned to his right and saw Kole in the seat across the aisle, smiling and flipping through a pornographic magazine.*

*"I'm dreaming," Samuel said.*

*Kole shook his head and chuckled. "No shit."*

*Samuel sat forward and raised his head above the seats. He looked to the front of the car and then toward the back.*



*"Just the two of us."*

*Samuel turned back to face Kole with a look of disgust.*

*"I've always hated that song."*

*The single reading light flickered and died, leaving Samuel's dream self with nothing but the silhouette of empty seats and Kole's voice.*

*"I don't care, because I die with this place." The sentence drained the remaining frivolity from Kole's voice.*

*"What about me?" Samuel asked.*

*"What about you? I don't know what your trip is, man. I don't know what punched your hole or how you slipped. But I know why I ain't going home."*

*Samuel slid from the window to the aisle seat. He looked into Kole's face and saw a line of moisture under one eye, the darkness concealing everything else.*

*"I can't give you absolution, but I can listen."*

*Kole nodded and began. "Always shot my mouth off before my brain could catch up. Guess they woulda labeled me ADHD these days, shoved drugs down my throat to cure me. Back in the late '70s I was a simple troublemaker. Knew early on college was not in my future. My older bro got the brains, I got the brawn."*

*Samuel saw Kole glance down at his left bicep.*

*"After high school, I started to unravel. Hung out in the wrong places with the wrong people, and sooner or later, that shit catches up to you. My dad warned me. I always knew he liked me the best. Well, the best out of the boys. My youngest sister was definitely his favorite kid. Anyway, he knew where I was headed. He never told us stories of his childhood, but I had a feeling he'd been up to the same shit, which is why him and I bonded.*

*"I ran numbers for a while, and scored a stash with low-level dealers, mostly street thugs who would sell you a vial of rat poison and let you die an agonizing death for ten bucks. I found out selling drugs required much less time than running numbers, and if you skimmed the inventory, you could get high for free. That's when I lost control."*

*A low, rumbling whistle emerged as the train continued toward the horizon, now dotted with the first stars of the evening. A sliver of moon poked up from the underworld. Samuel looked at Kole.*

*"Drugs make you do shit. They make you do things you couldn't imagine doing. The system is broke. I did three stints in county, and none of them were long enough to straighten me out. All they did was make me that much more hungry for the good shit, the drugs you can't get from dealing with the prison guards. The third time I got out is when it happened."*

*Samuel leaned in closer to Kole. The floor of the train vibrated underneath his feet and began to rattle his teeth.*

*"Got hopped up on the synthetic shit. Some redneck in a trailer probably cooked it up in a bathtub. It was really bad. I probably woulda been better off if it made my heart explode, but it didn't. Nope, just shut my brain down to the point where I was more animal than man.*

*"I never did deals in a park or in crowded places. Sure, it was safer and less of a chance of eating a bullet, but I didn't give a shit about my own safety by then. That deal in the park shoulda never gone down, for many reasons.*

*"My sidekick, Hoppy, set it up with one of the local street gangs. These thugs got their hands on a crate of Russian assault rifles, and all of a sudden they were rolling through town with their cocks swinging. I told Hoppy we didn't need the score, that we*

could move it without dealing with these assholes. But the money was too tempting, and the drugs fuck with your ability to make rational decisions.”

Kole paused. He knew most of the story was procrastination. He pushed through, without a choice. “I never saw her. Well, that’s not true. I stood over her dying body punched with seventeen bullet holes, but I never saw her before that. Was it my gun? Hoppy’s gun? The motherfucking puta that emptied his clip in the park? It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

Samuel waited, understanding Kole wasn’t looking for an answer.

“Her mom was in shock. She kept tugging at the girl’s backpack, trying to brush the blood off of it like it was dirt. She brushed her daughter’s hair back and ignored the hole that oozed black blood from her forehead. The scum that tried ripping us off bolted, and that’s probably what kept Hoppy and me from getting pinched for it. Everyone in the park fingered the dark-skinned fellas with machine guns strapped to their backs, fleeing the park at a full sprint. Hoppy and me, we just kinda walked out. We shoved our handguns into our waistbands and shuffled through the crowd with the same look of terror everyone else had.

“The court never got a chance to put them, or us, on trial. That mom never got a chance to speak her mind on her dead daughter’s behalf. Is it justice? Maybe. The cops caught up to them three blocks and ten minutes later. Put over sixty rounds in each of the thugs.”

The train accelerated. Samuel felt the windows vibrate, and looked down at the rock piles now blurring past in the darkness. Hundreds of white pinpoints appeared in the otherwise-black canvas.

“I think Hoppy met his match under a bridge about a year later. He thought he was getting a ten-dollar blowjob, but it turned into a switchblade to the gut. They say it takes a long time to bleed out that way. That it’s painful. I hope it was. That fucker deserved to die like a pig.”

“Something is happening with the train,” Samuel said. “It’s speeding up.”

Kole shook his head. “We ain’t got much time. I think you know all you need to know about me.”

“Except how you got here,” Samuel said.

“C’mon, man. Do I have to spell it all out for you?”

Samuel waited.

“After the deal went south and I parted ways with Hoppy, I went from King Shit to your average street junkie. I tried killing myself with that stuff. Man, did I try. But I ran out of money before I could finish the job. I got real low, as if having that little girl’s blood on my hands wasn’t low enough. I started doing shit for money, shit I’m not proud of.”

Samuel raised his eyebrows.

“Sucking dick, okay? Not like it matters I’m telling you this now. You don’t even know me. But yeah, that’s what I had to do to get my money for blow. Blow for blow.” Kole watched Samuel stifle a snicker. “It’s cool, man. I was making a joke.”

Kole waited for Samuel to stop smiling before he continued. “It’s never across, always with. The movies get it wrong. Slicing with the vein will almost always guarantee a tub full of blood.”

The train jerked to the left and then to the right. Kole extended both arms toward Samuel, turning his forearms upside down.

“So you pulled it off, the tub full of blood?” Samuel asked.

*"You tell me, hotshot. I'm here with you, the old man and the skinny emo chick. This place ain't home, and it's being eaten by a fucking cloud while zombies parade around the cabin that wild wolves left to rot. Did I pull it off?"*

*Samuel stared at Kole's face until he blinked.*

When his eyes reopened, he saw the crusty, hardwood floor of the cabin and the wall he faced on his makeshift bunk.

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Major stood at the window, his back facing the others in a cabin that felt more cramped with each passing hour. He shifted from one leg to the next, muttering underneath his breath. Samuel looked at Mara. She smiled, legs crossed on the chair. He felt the twinge in his chest as their eyes met. She was so young. It wouldn't matter unless he was a college professor and she was a second-semester freshman. He could see Mara, dreamy-eyed and optimistic. But this was not a campus and he was not a professor. He let go of her gaze and turned to face Kole. He had run out of charcoal and so resumed drawing figures in the dust. Kole winked at Samuel and dropped his chin. Samuel raised his eyebrows and turned away.

"Thousands, probably," Major said.

Samuel stood and walked over to him. He used his elbow to smear more grease from the windowpane and stooped to look out.

The human forms clumped like cattle in anticipation of a thunderstorm. They stood underneath trees and out in the open. The lonely figures canted to one side, always leaning toward the west and the oncoming force of destruction. Others grouped together, huddled in their rags, with colorless faces. Samuel stared, thinking the creatures could be confused for statues. He didn't see them move but realized they had to have arrived there somehow. The Barren no longer stretched open and clear to the tree line. The silent forms hid the ground from view.

"Are they planning an attack?" Mara asked from the chair, one hand circling and rubbing her other wrist.

"I think they're guardians. Going to keep us in here, stand guard until the cloud can consume it all."

Samuel looked at Major's face and grimaced at his response. "Pinning us down with sheer numbers?" he asked.

"Could be."

Kole stood and threw a piece of kindling into the corner of the cabin. "I'm out," he said, walking toward the door.

Samuel stepped in front of him and spun so his back rested on the cool wood of the door.

"Nobody's leaving," Samuel said.

"Outta my way, cowboy."

Samuel looked at Mara, then Major. Neither moved.

"I can't let you do that. If you go out there, who knows what they'll do."

"Looks to me like they aren't doing anything but making you shit your pants," Kole said. "Get out of my way before I knock you out."

Major nodded at Samuel, who stepped to the side and turned a palm up toward the doorknob.

"Fine. Go right ahead."

Kole snickered. He bent his right arm at an angle and lifted it to kiss the bicep. "Smackdown."

Kole turned the knob and Samuel heard the gasp from Major.

The thousands of faces that had been staring at the ground turned up to the door in one motion. Every form revealed a blank, dead gaze, their eyes nothing but eternal black marks, mouths open with tongues protruding like baby serpents.

"Don't," Samuel said to Kole.

Kole pulled the door the rest of the way open and stepped out on the porch. The creatures groaned in unison. Legs moved toward the cabin with the sounds of brittle bones snapping under the strain. The creatures shifted forward in a mass of grey, decaying flesh.

Mara lunged for the door and slammed it shut behind Kole. She threw herself against it, her chest rising and falling in rapid succession.

"He's sparked some interest," Major said.

Samuel moved back to the window and watched Kole take two steps off the porch. The bodies continued moving toward him. They marched at a slow pace, but with the certainty their prey would never escape. Samuel looked deeper, toward the tree line, and saw wave after wave of the creatures coming out of the forest and making their way to Kole.

Kole crouched, bent his knees and raised his fist. He yelled something, but the sound was swallowed by the dying locality. The first two undead who came close to Kole wore men's clothing. They extended their arms, thumbs touching. Their eyes locked on Kole and their mouths opened and closed at irregular intervals. Kole cocked his right arm behind his ear and stepped into the punch. The form closest absorbed the strike with his cheek, its head twisting with the force of it. The creature's legs continued to propel it toward Kole.

Kole reared back and struck the walking corpse two more times in the face, each one sending a spray of skin and rotted cloth into the air, but not stopping its forward momentum. Its fingers grasped Kole's shoulder, while the second one grabbed his waist. Kole flailed, and fists flung through the air as if tethered by rope instead of arms. Every landed punch sounded like a sledgehammer striking a rotted pumpkin. Others continued walking toward the altercation, mobs beneath the trees and more coming from the forest.

"They're going to tear him apart," Mara said, the nail on her index finger secured between her teeth.

"It's what he wanted," Major said.

Samuel shook his head and turned back to the fight in the yard. Four more creatures made it to Kole.

"Move," he said to Mara.

Samuel nudged her aside and opened the door. He heard the grunts of the creatures and Kole's heavy breathing from underneath their arms. Samuel took two strides from the bottom of the steps and into the middle of the undead mob pinning Kole to the ground. He grabbed the shoulder of one. The creature turned and Samuel froze. Its dead eyes stared into his and he felt his heart stammer in his chest. He regained his composure and tossed the creature to the side, where it crumpled to the ground, struggling to stand again. Samuel heard Kole gasp, but couldn't see him beneath the pile of rotted flesh. He shoved a hand toward where he thought Kole might be.

"Grab my hand," he said, shoving his arm among undead bodies and ratted clothing.

The creatures ignored Samuel and his rescue attempt, determined to rip Kole apart.

A colorful sleeve of tattoos reached out, snapping tight on Samuel's wrist. He pulled until there was enough for him to grab Kole's elbow with his other arm. Samuel dug his heels in and yanked again. Kole's head emerged, his eyes frantic. With his free arm, Kole swatted at his attackers as if they were hornets from a crushed nest. Samuel took another step backward until the resistance dropped, sending him into the railing of the front porch. The impact knocked the air from his lungs. Kole landed on top of him.

The door swung open, and Major and Mara each grabbed one of Kole's arms and dragged him inside the cabin. They dropped him in a whimpering pile as Samuel burst through the doorway, slamming the door shut. Major ran to the window. The forms had stopped moving, standing in place as if shut down by a master switch.

"Are you okay?" Mara asked Kole.

He brushed her hand aside and grabbed Samuel by the shirt collar. Kole turned his head toward Samuel, trying to force the words over his hitching breath.

"Thanks for nothing, asshole," Kole said. He reached back and punched Samuel in the nose. Samuel saw the explosion of color in his field of vision and felt the warm flow of salty blood starting to ooze down his throat. Before he could wince in pain, he lost consciousness.

Mara slapped Kole in the back of the head. He stood, wobbled to one side, and backhanded her across the face. The sharp slap bounced off the walls of the cramped cabin. She dropped to one knee, her hand massaging the red mark blooming on her cheek. Major stepped up, and Kole met him in the middle of the room.

"Back off, old man," he said.

Major saw the fury on Kole's face and knew he could not overpower a man half his age and twice as mad. He looked at Samuel and Mara before responding to Kole.

"Sit and calm down."

Kole looked at Major and then at Mara. He snickered and slumped down the wall to the floor.

"It don't matter. Death by zombie or by reversion. It's all the same to me."

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Samuel winced as he rolled over and sat up, brushing a lock of hair off his forehead. The heel of his palm glanced off the bridge of his nose and he felt the pain radiate through his entire body. His eyes watered and he bit his lip. When his vision cleared, Samuel struggled to see past the swollen mess of his face. Major, Mara and Kole sat in a circle on the rickety chairs, Major keeping one eye on the window.

Samuel stood and swayed, reaching out with both hands to grasp the wall and keep the room from spinning. Dried blood caked in the creases of his face and stained his neck with dark, maroon lines. Samuel touched the bridge of his nose until the pain began to blossom. He grabbed a chair and swung it around until it sat between Kole and Mara.

"Sucker punch," he mumbled to Kole.

"Whatever," Kole said.

"Are you okay?" Mara asked as she touched his forearm. "I mean from them, not your nose. That looks pretty bad too, though."

"Isn't the first time I broke it. Probably won't be the last."

Major glanced over his shoulder and then turned back to the window.

"What did I miss while I was bleeding on the floor?"

"More," Mara said. "You can barely see anything but the tops of their disgusting heads. Filthy, stringy hair as far as you can see. They sway back and forth like long grass in the wind, but none of them move. It's like they're filling in the gaps so we're packed in here."

Samuel stooped and leaned over Mara to look out the window. He saw countless, empty, dead faces staring back in the maddening silence. Samuel thought it wouldn't be so bad if they made noise, or screamed, or pounded on the door. The silence of this decaying place combined with the ominous approach of the cloud overhead sent a chill up his spine.

"They won't move unless one of us tries to leave the cabin. Then their brittle bones shuffle ahead in one mass."

"The fuckers wanted a piece of me," Kole said, never taking his eyes off the window.

"No," Major said. He shook his head. "They were holding you down. I don't think they were trying to harm you."

"Nice to know I risked my ass and took a sucker punch to the nose for nothing."

Kole looked at Samuel's nose and then at Mara. "Got your pity pussy all worked up. You should thank me for that."

Mara sent a glare of disgust toward him.

Major pushed back on his chair until the front two legs came off the floor. "I don't know how we're supposed to fight through so many of those things, but I do know if we don't, the cloud will reach this cabin soon, and the reversion will take us with it. If there is any hope of survival, we have to get out of here."

Mara reached out again and placed a hand on Samuel's arm, while Kole shook his head and snickered under his breath.

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The fire smoldered over the coals, the heat failing to dispel the chill from the cabin as if the flame itself was losing its will to exist. Mara stirred a wooden ladle of broth inside an iron pot with a steady, mindless motion while staring at the wall. Kole and Major sat next to each other on their respective chairs, shoulder to shoulder, casting long gazes across the undead landscape. Samuel walked over and stood next to Mara. He inhaled and recognized the scent of her hair. He thought that when the reversion dulled the rest of his senses, he might lose his mind. A chuckle escaped his lips as the term "cabin fever" rolled around in his head.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"So you laugh at random times about nothing? Are you psychotic?"

"I remembered a phrase that made me laugh, that's all," he said.

Kole stole a glance over one shoulder and decided the rotten horde was more interesting than Samuel and Mara's conversation.

"Do you remember stuff?" Samuel asked.

Mara stopped stirring and let the ladle rest against the side. "More than I care to," she said.

"I get snapshots. I see a picture from my past, and the story fills in around it. One second, my past doesn't exist, and the next, an image brings back a chunk of it."

Mara shrugged. "If this reversion is really the end, and those things aren't letting us out, I'm not sure it really matters. Not sure anything does."

"I agree."

"I don't think this . . ." Mara said, with an arm spinning to unfold the cabin, the Barren, the locality, the entire situation. "I don't think this matters. It's not in our control."

"Kind of depressing."

"Kind of true," she said.

Major and Kole remained seated and silent, their eyes following the swaying bodies.

Samuel felt a desire for privacy, a need to have Mara's conversation all to himself. He looked about the cabin and its four menacing walls, which seemed to creep in further toward the center. He remembered his dream and the conversation with Kole.

"I think I need to rest," he said.

She nodded. Samuel balled a rucksack for a pillow and curled up in the corner, while the heat from the fire did little to comfort him.

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*He opened his eyes to a bustle of activity. Glowing orbs of glass hung from a silver cable, warming the room with incandescent light. The bitter aroma of roasted coffee filled every crevice. Burlap sacks that once held beans hung from the walls, decorated with stamps from their countries of origin. A behemoth, silver freezer sat in one corner, rumbling as it kept the gourmet ice cream frozen. The machine on the counter whistled, and a barista coaxed the hot air into a frothy mix.*

*A man with a black fedora sat in the corner, perched atop a three-legged stool like a pigeon on a skyscraper. He wore a maple-bodied acoustic guitar strapped across his torso, fingers moving across the frets. He spilled blue notes and minor chords into the swirling mix of muted conversation and clanking dishes. Samuel recognized the melody, an old delta blues standard, but he could not place the song. A microphone jutted from the top of a stand, but the guitarist ignored its existence, his head down and swaying along with the swinging beat created by his right hand above the sound hole.*

*Samuel looked down at a white mug on a table. A book and a folded newspaper sat askew, the newspaper dangling from the edge as if trying to escape. He could see the dark swirls in his chai latte as the steam climbed through the air. He noticed a half-dozen other people involved in various solitary acts. One woman bounced her head in rhythm to the song confined to her ear buds, ignoring the guitarist pouring his soul forth from the guitar. One man sat in the corner, a single chair at a small table facing the wall. He thumbed through a crumpled, dog-eared book. A young couple sat at a table across the room. They both wore safety pins for earrings and patches on their black leather jackets, declaring allegiance to long-dead punk bands. The man had his hands on the table face up, while the woman had hers inside of his, facedown. They gazed into each other's faces, oblivious to everyone else in the room.*

*Samuel turned back to the bluesman. He saw the alabaster skin on his hands and chuckled. Purists claimed the white man could never play the blues like the originators, but he wasn't a purist. Samuel closed his eyes and let the familiar, twelve-bar pattern soothe his nerves.*

*"Is this seat taken?"*

The question ripped him from his thoughts. He opened his eyes to find a woman standing before him, holding a steaming mug and a Danish on a plate. The corner of the wax paper beneath the pastry stuck out at Samuel like a preschooler's tongue.

"No," he said.

Samuel felt an immediate sense of connection with the woman or, more accurately, the girl. But he also felt a deep sadness. She appeared to be on the verge of womanhood, sparkling eyes, slight hips and an optimism about love and life she would share with everyone she knew.

She wore her jet black hair below the shoulder in wavy patterns that reflected deep, purple hues in the light of the coffee shop. Samuel loved the way it framed her oval face. The woman's skin shone with a brilliance punctuated by dark eye shadow and glistening, maroon lips. She shed her bulky winter coat to reveal a lithe form beneath. Faded, black jeans clung to her shapely legs and rode low on slender hips. She wore a ragged, gray sweater over a black nylon top that held her breasts upright. Samuel guessed her to be in her early twenties, but with a vulnerability that made her appear even younger. He made eye contact, trying to avoid being hypnotized by her blue eyes.

"I'm Mara," she said, extending her hand outward while placing her coffee on the table.

"Samuel," he said.

"I never approach guys. Even at the bar. Sorry if this is a bit awkward."

He smiled and waved off the fumbling attempt to break the ice. "It's fine."

Mara paused and took a long look. She gazed at Samuel, and he saw electricity pass through her face.

"Oh my god," she whispered.

Samuel sat still. He lifted his mug to his lips until the coffee singed his bottom lip.

"What am I doing here?" she asked.

Without waiting to confirm her revelation, Samuel explained. "I know I'm asleep. Dreaming. Maybe you are, too. Even if you're not, I think we can communicate this way. I did with Kole."

She froze, as if that name slapped her across the face. She looked around at the bluesman, the punk lovers, the bustling barista.

"I don't know," she said. Mara looked at her hands, holding shiny, red nails up to her face. "It feels so real."

"Most dreams do, until you wake up."

She nodded in agreement. "How can we— What should—"

Samuel laughed as Mara's brain struggled to process what was happening. "I don't know. The dream scenario I had with Kole was, well, not quite as comfortable as this one. Why don't we enjoy our gourmet coffees and talk?"

Mara looked over each shoulder as if the authorities were about to break down the door in an FBI raid.

"I think we're good until I wake up. Scone?"

She smiled and leaned back in the chair. "I miss this," she said, twirling a strand of hair around her slim fingers. "I miss my hair, the fragrance of my body wash, insignificant things."

"Funny how life's little pleasures escape your notice until you lose them all," Samuel said. "I miss my music."



*He turned to face the man in the fedora. The melody changed. The key changed. However, the faceless guitar slinger continued to jam those comfortable, familiar chords.*

*"Tell me about you," Samuel said.*

*Mara blushed and passed a hand in front of her face.*

*"Sorry. That sounded so bad. Didn't mean to embarrass you." He shuffled in his seat and moved his mug from one hand to the other.*

*"It's okay. I'm not very good around guys."*

*"What do you mean?" he asked, leaning forward. "Guys at your school must be tripping over you."*

*Mara shook her head. "Dropped out second semester sophomore year and never went back. I commuted, anyways. Didn't really buy into the whole college experience."*

*Samuel left it at that, sensing the scab on that wound never entirely healed. "I get it."*

*"What was college like for you, you know, back in the day?" she asked with a wide smile.*

*Samuel leaned back and looked at the ceiling. "It was hard carrying all the clay tablets back and forth to class. We didn't even have the wheel back then."*

*"I didn't mean it that way—"*

*Samuel took a turn at dispelling the clumsiness. "I know."*

*Mara sipped from her mug. Samuel loved the way she cupped her long, slender fingers around it on both sides. If she had a scarf, she could be on the cover of one of those trendy catalogs for European kitchen gadgets.*

*"You're kinda cute for an older guy."*

*Samuel blushed. The bluesman stopped playing and was shuffling through a handful of papers while holding the guitar on his lap.*

*"Tell me your story," Samuel said.*

*"Can't we just sit here and drink coffee and leave it at that?"*

*He sensed reluctance in her voice, but felt a pressure to force the issue.*

*"I don't think that's why we're here. I think I'm getting these dream opportunities for a reason. It must have something to do with the reversion."*

*The last word made her shudder. It pulled the curtain back on the coffeehouse façade, which Mara had convinced herself was the new reality.*

*"Fine," she said, a new coldness emanating from her face.*

*Samuel waited. He drummed his fingers on the table as the notes spewed forth from the guitar again. The punk rockers brushed past with a mixture of leather, espresso and jasmine incense.*

*"We didn't have much. My dad worked the factory. He turned a nut on rods, or some bullshit like that. We never really knew exactly what he did, but it kept him at sixty to seventy hours a week. He'd work a full eight-hour shift on Sunday and be home by noon."*

*She let the statement hang and gave Samuel time to do the math.*

*"Didn't leave much quality family time. My mom babysat, which made me and my brother feel even less special. On any given day, ten or twelve kids would be running through the house. My dad would come home after a twelve-hour shift and the chaos would eat at him. I swear you could see it in his face."*

*The guitarist shifted into a down-tempo shuffle that reminded Samuel of "Stormy Monday." He thought of the dark cloud propelling the reversion forward, and the title of*

the song, before pushing it from his thoughts.

"I'm telling you this because it had a lot to do with me leaving school. My mom got sick and couldn't watch kids anymore, and the factory started losing contracts to overseas companies, which meant my dad lost hours and eventually his job. I took over parenting for my younger brother, and I couldn't do that and keep up with my studies at the same time."

"I wonder how many other women have been in that same situation."

Samuel meant the comment as a token of empathy, understanding, but Mara simply shrugged and continued.

"Tommy, my little brother, was late that night. I was going to pick him up from hockey practice because my dad was already asleep and my mom had taken too many of her 'little sleep helpers' to even consider getting behind the wheel. I remember thinking how crazy it was for a twelve-year-old kid to be at hockey practice until eleven o'clock on a Friday night. They don't call Detroit 'Hockeytown' for nothing."

Hearing the name of the city ignited a synapse in Samuel's dream brain. He felt an ache behind his forehead, trapped in a place where it would gnaw and fester. And you let him out there

"I think it was December. It had already been dark for like seven hours and a heavy, wet snow had been falling for the past two. Detroit was in dire shape. They couldn't afford to put police officers on the street, let alone rock salt or sand from a plow. If you live there, you accept it.

"So I was on my way to get Tommy, cranking some killer metal on the car's CD player."

Samuel nodded. Then he held up his hand, flashing Mara the devil horns, an international sign for heavy metal.

"I don't think Dio started that, but it's fine if history thinks so."

Samuel raised his eyebrows and smiled. His mind flashed to a Judas Priest concert he attended as a teenager, and he couldn't remember any fans that even remotely resembled someone like Mara. He would have gone to many more if they had.

"Yeah. So the car is really warm and the music is really loud, two things that wouldn't be happening in our house. My time in the car was as much of an escape as I could manage. I guess it's why I never complained too much about chauffeuring Tommy around. It gave me time alone to think and listen to metal.

"He was waiting for me on the curb with his stick held like a sword in one of those high-fantasy movies. I remember him being the only kid sitting out there on top of his hockey bag. He came running over to the car toward the trunk. I pulled the latch, and it rose like the opening jaws of a monster. He swung all of his weight around to get the bag to clear the bottom of the bumper. He pushed the rest of it in and then shoved the stick on top. I heard the muffled thump of the trunk shutting. Tommy yanked on the handle of the passenger side door, and I shook my head. He was a skinny kid and not heavy enough to sit in the front, you know, with the airbag laws and stuff."

Samuel nodded. The more Mara talked, the more he shifted in his seat. The delicate strumming of the bluesman started to erode his patience.

"Tommy climbed into the backseat and started immediately yapping about practice. I turned the music down to let Tommy have his say. It's not like Mom or Dad was going to ask him about practice when we got home.

*"I made a right out of the parking lot and eased on to Route 24. The four-lane cut right through our hometown. Strip malls and used-car lots straddled it with an occasional stoplight thrown in to allow greedy idiots out of the big-box stores with their plastic crap."*

*Samuel smiled. He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and began shooting glances about the room. The patrons continued on their individual pursuits, and the notes coming from the guitar strings felt like death by a thousand cuts.*

*"Like I said, it was December, dark and cold. With snow. But that wasn't really a factor in it."*

*A wheeze escaped Samuel's lips.*

*"I passed through a busier section of 24, closer to the stretch with the car dealerships. They were all closed, but there was an Italian restaurant across the street from one that always served dinner late. We were driving at about forty-five, keeping the limit. We had some old-school Metallica jamming. Pretty sure it was Ride the Lightning, probably "Fade to Black." Tommy and me, we loved that song. The dynamics are brutal.*

*"There weren't many cars on the road, but enough to keep the headlights dancing in the mirrors. Tommy shifted into the center area of the backseat, finding some way to do that while keeping the seatbelt fastened. He knew I'd friggin' flip if he didn't have it on."*

*Mara shifted in her seat and drew a breath. She had doled out as many of the inconsequential details as she could, and now it was time to tell Samuel what he wanted to know.*

*"There was a car in front of me, maybe a hundred yards or so, and nobody behind. We were in the left lane with nothing but faded lines on asphalt to separate us from the traffic going the other way."*

*Mara could no longer look at Samuel. Her vision clouded from the tears oozing from the corner of her eyes.*

*"So anyway, the car in front hits the brakes hard. I see the flash and think he probably wanted a lasagna and passed the parking lot going forty-five or fifty. But then I got that feeling in my gut, the kind that probably comes from evolutionary instinct, if you believe in that kind of thing.*

*"The car fishtails, and by now I've closed the distance and I've taken my foot off the accelerator. Dad always got pissed when I used the brake to slow down on the highway. He said if you remove your foot from the gas, you'll slow down and won't scare the shit out of the people behind you.*

*"By now the car is spinning on the slick roads and I see the side of some featureless sedan. And as soon as it crosses to the right into the slow lane, I saw the headlights from a car coming in the opposite direction and crossing the double yellow line."*

*The blues player stopped strumming. The barista stood with a dirty dish rag in one hand and an empty mug in another. Everyone inside the coffee shop stopped and stood like motionless creatures trapped in a dying world. Samuel's eyes shifted from one to the next as their skin, hair and clothing morphed into a greyscale curtain of despair. He watched as teeth fell out and eyes turned to obsidian voids. The oppressive silence of the reversion swallowed the hustle of the coffee shop. The smell of incense and roasted coffee disappeared as well. Samuel watched the lights dim,*

*and the walls dropped their adornments like a tattered robe, allowing the crooked and rotten planks to show through.*

*"The headlights looked like eyes," Mara said. "I know that's a corny cliché, but it's true. The car looked like an angry beast. I remember starting to swerve the wheel in the midst of Tommy yelling. Time sped up and then slowed. I watched as the filaments in the headlights exploded on impact. That was the last thing I could see. I remember thinking I wasn't even going to see the face of the other driver. Was it a man? Woman? Were they drunk, lost, disoriented? Were they courting death, like me?"*

*"The hood shot upward into the shape of an inverted V on impact. I can't really explain the sound. You would literally piss your pants if you heard it. I think I did. I felt it more than I heard it. It was like the oncoming beast was eating my car."*

*Mara paused. She put a napkin to each eye while Samuel stared at his folded hands. More and more of the creatures from the dying locality appeared in the coffee shop in complete silence. They stood next to the table and behind Mara. Samuel tried not to look into those lost faces.*

*"I'm short. I was short," Mara said, stumbling over her existence within an unknown world buried in the dream of another. "The seatbelt locked and I felt the burn on my neck."*

*Samuel lifted his head and saw Mara tugging at the collar of her shirt. She pulled it down far enough for him to see the bruise he noticed when he arrived at the Barren.*

*"And then blackness. I don't remember pain, not sure what happened to Tommy, what happened to anything."*

*The tears came freely, without Mara using words to plug the dike.*

*"I can't even remember how long there was blackness. When I opened my eyes again, I was here," she said, using an arm to scan the room of the standing undead. "Well, not here, but here in this locality."*

*"Where?" Samuel asked, unable to speak more than a single syllable.*

*"Wandering through that fucking forest. The one where nooses hang like leaves from the branches. The one you came from."*

*He paused and put a hand over his mouth. "Do you think you're dead?" he asked.*

*"Do you think I'm dead?" she said. "I guess I wasn't sure up until now."*

*Samuel felt the room shudder. The forms in front of his face shimmered as if the entire room were submersed in water. He lifted his shoulders, sensing what was coming.*

*"I'm waking up."*

*He reached across the table to grasp Mara's hand. She extended hers and looked into his face through puffy, red eyes.*

*Samuel blinked the sleep from his eyes, staring at the back of Kole's head as he slept on the floor of the cabin. Major glanced down at Samuel and then returned his stare to the window and the undead sentinels on the other side.*



## Chapter 11

The four of them sat like prisoners within the walls of the one-room cell. Major shifted every so often, bending and craning his neck to acquire a better view of the army of undead soldiers surrounding the cabin. Their presence destroyed the Barren and any hope of exploring it further. Mara and Samuel sat on their respective chairs, across from each other at the table, while Kole remained slumped on the floor, running his finger through the dust. One lonely pot of gruel remained, which they hoped would last for as long as they needed it. Major saved three cloudy bottles of water, now positioned at his feet.

The harbinger of the reversion, the looming cloud, blotted out the sky. It devoured the tops of the trees and crept ever eastward in the march toward the end. Swirls of grey and slate slurry moved through the silent, roiling mass. Any light Samuel could remember from his arrival in this place had become a distant memory. The standing human remains continued to sway back and forth, as if caught in a slight breeze.

Mara held her chin low on her chest and fidgeted with her hands. Samuel saw her fingernails and winced. Ragged lines of red ran down her cuticles, raw from her own teeth and saliva. Her once-luxurious, black hair, which radiated the ambient light of the coffee shop, lay in greasy, clumped masses, flakes of dandruff speckled like maggots on rotting meat. Samuel could not see her eyes, and he thought it was probably better this way. He didn't think he could handle the sorrow contained in them. Every so often, Mara would sigh and shake her head, never raising it.

"We're running out of time." Major spoke, the most he had in days, if days could still be measured here.

"They've got us pinned down. You saw what happened when Kole tried getting through."

Kole looked up at the mention of his name and shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the cloud do?" Mara asked, head tilted upward but face covered in stringy hair.

"It's an eater of worlds. It leaves nothing behind."

"Will the creatures kill us? Can they kill us?" Samuel asked.

"Death by zombie, eh?" Major asked with a chuckle. "Like running out to a cop and waving a gun in his face. This is the land of suicide."

"What about the wolves?" Samuel asked.

Major sat upright and raised his eyebrows. "What about them?"

"Are they gone? Did the cloud get to them already?"

Major shrugged.

"If we could get them here, it might be enough to distract the creatures outside," Samuel said.

"For what?" Kole asked. "Distract them so we can go where? Do you see the fucking storm brewing out there? I might opt for having my brains eaten instead of what that evil cloud might bring."

Mara dug her forehead into the heel of her palms.

"I'm not ready to lie down and die," Samuel said.

"Yeah, well maybe you should be," Kole said.

"Is there any rope in this cabin?" Samuel asked.

Major held both palms out. "Haven't you had enough of swinging from the noose?"

"Listen," Samuel said. "I'm climbing to the roof and then, with rope and the low-hanging branches, I'm getting out in front of the horde."

"They're as far as the eye can see," Kole said, referring to the undead swarming the land.

"But they're slow. If I can get out in front, there might be a chance."

"Better than sitting here," Mara said.

Major pushed a chair aside and opened a cabinet near the table, lifting out a bucket. Tied to the handle was a coiled rope.

"The hemp looks rotted and shaky. But it's all yours if you want it," Major said.

Samuel stood and grabbed it. He untied the knot from the handle and pulled a three-foot section taut. He raised his eyebrows and looked at Major. The old man smiled and looked at Kole. Kole shook his head and went back to circling his finger around a knot in the floorboard. Mara stood.

"Looks like they're a few yards away from the front door. If you get out there quickly, you might be able to shimmy up the corner post and hop onto the roof of the cabin before they close in."

"Any other suggestions?" Samuel asked, trying to keep the glimmer of hope from overtaking reality.

"Yeah, send the bitch first," Kole said.

Samuel ignored him. He set the rope down on the floor and began to pull it through his hands, a foot or two at a time. He noticed several places where the fibers felt weak or had begun to unravel, but not enough for him to consider cutting it and using a shorter piece. Samuel guessed he had about twenty feet of rope he could depend on and another ten that could snap under pressure.

"Please get us out of here," Mara whispered.

Samuel nodded.

Mara rose up on her toes and placed a kiss on Samuel's lips. He felt the push of her warm breath on his mouth and the excitement of having a woman so close. But when her lips contacted his, his mind reeled. Conflicting emotions and deep sorrow raced through his body.

"Time is short," Major said, breaking the spell. "Take this knife. It ain't much, but..."

Samuel looked at Mara and did not speak. She sat back down on the chair and crossed her legs. Major stepped between her and Samuel.

"Consider going east. If you can get out in front of the horde, that's great, but it's the cloud you're really racing."

Major shoved his hand out to Samuel, and the two men shook. Kole waved them off without moving from the floor.

"Get high and do it fast. The longer you stay on the ground, the easier it will be for them to pin you down," Major said.

"I'll do my best," Samuel said, searching for a more convincing line and not finding it.

Major walked toward the door, followed by Samuel. Mara remained, as did Kole, who didn't bother looking up. The old man placed one hand on the knob and the other on the back of the door. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After springing them open, he turned to face Samuel.

"Ready?" he asked.

Samuel nodded.

Major turned the squeaky knob with one hand and yanked the plank door open. The front line of the horde turned their empty faces from the ground to the cabin. Mouths hung open in silent screams as the dirt shuffled beneath their feet. Samuel stood, fixed to the cabin floor as the creatures moved toward him. He froze, his mouth turning dry and his heart accelerating in his chest.

"And out you go," Kole said from behind him.

Samuel felt two hands strike his shoulder blades, sending him sprawling to the ground in front of the cabin. He spun around in time to see Kole's wicked grin disappearing behind the door.

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The first thing Samuel did was reach down to secure the knife on his hip. He lifted his head and saw feet moving toward him, sending up clouds of brown dust. Most of them were bare, and many had bones poking through thin skin.

Samuel pushed off the ground and onto his backside. He watched dozens of the horde meander in his direction, arms at their sides and heads cocked in one direction. Their black orbs remained open with an empty stare, as if they felt his presence.

Samuel glanced back at the window of the cabin to see shifting, pale faces behind the greasy film coating the panes. He looked to the right, where a support post held the roof. Samuel stood and gripped the top of the post with both hands. He used his upper body to pull himself toward the roof, his legs locked around the pole to prevent a slide back down. He heaved his body onto the mossy, wooden-shake roof and rolled onto his back before pulling his legs up, too. The formless, silent cloud tumbled in the space where the sky used to be. It looked down on Samuel, and he thought he detected motion from left to right, the cloud heading toward the east to conclude its consummation of this place. Swirls of deep grey extended out and contracted like oil in water. Before he could lose himself in the shapeless horror of it, he felt the cabin shudder.

Samuel leaned over the edge and gazed out upon a sea of creatures shambling toward the cabin ten feet below. He watched countless heads with tufts of tangled hair pushing forward like a crowd at a rock concert. They nudged and leaned on each other but never stopped moving forward. He noticed they didn't try to open the door or break the window. They had no concern for those inside, the ones the reversion would swallow whole. Instead, they gathered under the support pole, pursuing him, the one who left the sanctity of their final resting place, attempting to escape the inevitable.

Samuel looked down and watched as hands reached into the air like the filaments of a jellyfish, slim, random movements in an ocean of certain decay. The horde either could not or did not want to climb. Samuel considered the roof his temporary haven and sat down to think. He unfurled the rope and took one end in his hands. He wrapped it around his waist and tied the best knot he could before standing and assessing the trees. A tall oak stood about twenty feet from the edge of the roof, far

out of his reach. However, one of its major branches sagged low, angling five feet from the cabin. He spun in a circle to verify this was the only tree close enough to attempt what he knew had to be done.

Samuel tied the loose end of the rope into a bulge of knots. If he could toss it over the branch and have it swing back like a pendulum, he might be able to grab it and pull himself on to the low-hanging branch like an adventure-seeker gripping a zip-line. He moved as close to the edge as possible, prompting the horde to flow to that side of the cabin. Most kept their heads down like obedient cattle, but several began raising their bony arms, reaching for him.

He cocked his arm back and let the rope fly. It smacked off the bottom of the trunk, nowhere near the branch, and swung low over the heads of the creatures on the ground. They could not react fast enough to grab it, but their shuffling became more rapid, as though they sensed what he was trying to do. He reared back again. This time, the knotted end cleared the branch, but he missed it when it came swinging back underneath. Samuel yanked at the rope and pulled it back for a third try. Again, he lobbed the rope clear of the branch, and caught it. Samuel pulled the rope taut, tied both ends together, and leapt from the roof with both hands on the rope.

At first, he swung back and forth, his feet kicking in air in a vain attempt to slow his momentum. He closed his eyes and imagined the old, frayed hemp snapping and dropping him ten feet to the ground amidst the undead. Samuel shook his head and cleared his vision. He waited as gravity slowed his swing until the rope rested perpendicular to the ground, suspending him above the horde.

*Gravity and physics, my safety net*, he thought, thankful the reversion hadn't violated universal laws.

Samuel used his hands to pull himself up the rope five feet until he was within reach of the branch. It stuck out from the tree trunk like a bony, crooked finger and Samuel was not sure it would hold his weight. He felt the burn in his biceps and chest. Samuel never thought the pull-up bar in his basement was good for much more than a bump on the head when walking underneath it. Now he was thankful for those early morning workouts that concluded with fifty reps. He clawed the bark until he had enough room to swing his left leg over the branch. Within seconds, he straddled it, looking down at the horde.

Like a logger, Samuel quickly removed the slack from the rope and shuffled forward fifteen feet until he reached the main trunk of the old tree. He pulled himself up and stood with his feet together, plenty of room to turn and push his back against the trunk. He took a deep breath and let a smile creep across his face. It wasn't much, but he had made it out of the cabin to a place the horde couldn't reach.

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"Because."

"Because? That's the best you can come up with?"

"No. It's the least I can come up with. I don't owe you or the old man any explanation," Kole said.

Mara tucked her hands underneath her arms to accentuate the way they crossed her chest.

"You're a real asshole," she said.

"That's the best you can come up with?" he asked, mocking her.

Major stared out the window while Mara and Kole faced off. He shook his head and mumbled to himself when he no longer heard Samuel's feet above.



"He's off the roof, and the creatures are moving toward that tree."

Mara and Kole stooped to have a better view, jostling like brother and sister.

"Do you think he's going to make it?" Mara asked.

"Make it where?" Kole asked. "Before you get your panties all wet, consider where we are. I don't see him—or us for that matter—outrunning that fucking cloud, do you?"

"It might be possible to survive it."

Kole looked at Major after he spoke and shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

Major sat back and looked into Kole's eyes. He could see the darkness eating the man from the inside out.

"Like surviving a tornado or a flood. Even though the disaster lays waste to the land, people survive it. Somehow, people always survive it."

Kole reared back, his fists balled and blood rushing to his face. "I'm done with you. I'm done with your cryptic bullshit. If there is more about this place, us, those fucking creatures, anything—if there is more, I want to hear it now, or I'll split your fucking head open with my bare fists."

Mara stepped in front of Kole, her face inches from Major's. "Tell us."

"There are ways to slip out of a reversion. I've done it before," Major said.

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Samuel scanned the horizon, above the cabin and as far as he could see in the empty gloom brought by the cloud. He looked toward what he thought was the east, hoping to find a glimmer of ambient light struggling to break through the darkness, but he saw nothing. The shapes of nearby trees stood out in relief against the cloud, the leafless branches scratching at the sky with bony fingers. He could see over the Barren and cabins. He thought of Mara. He saw her at the table, sipping a mug of coffee and enjoying the outlook of optimistic youth. He felt a twinge in his chest and pushed his emotions aside.

The horde had reconfigured. Half of the closest creatures swayed beneath his tree, no longer looking up or reaching into the sky for him. The other half inside the Barren circled the cabin, standing silent guard and waiting to pounce on Major, Kole or Mara if they came out.

He thought about those three.

*I really don't know who they are. I can speak with them in dreams. Maybe I'm not concerned about getting them out. Maybe I'll swing through these trees like Tarzan and make them a distant memory.*

As much as he tried, he could not convince himself to abandon them in the cabin.

*They are my responsibility now. I've got to go back.*

Samuel shook the thoughts from his head and focused on the immediate task. He shimmied around the trunk until he was able to climb onto another branch on the opposite side of the tree. This one grew out toward another twenty yards away. He looked down at the huddle of creatures and then inched out, locking his feet behind him, toes down on the surface of the branch while he used his knees to squeeze it between his thighs. Samuel put his chest on the rough bark, shuffling forward. He had made it halfway across when he looked down.

The branch angled upward toward the sky at a sharp angle. The creatures had reassembled, following his motion. They shambled along, twenty feet below. Samuel closed his eyes and kept moving until the branch brought him to the main trunk of the next tree. He sat up and hugged the trunk and swung his legs around until he was

standing upright in a new tree. Samuel slapped the trunk and let out a victory holler, the only sound in the barren landscape. He stood and surveyed the situation again. Although the darkness and the cloud fought over the locality like two mutts over a hunk of meat, he had gained a different perspective. The Barren stretched out a bit behind him, facing west. Samuel thought he could see a faint, blurry area between the edge of the advancing cloud and the black sky. The strip glimmered as if hanging above a bonfire. He watched the shapes break and meld, and wondered what would happen if the cloud swallowed the entire sky, as he thought it would. Beyond the Barren, and as far east as he could see, Samuel spotted another rise, probably a mountain. The peak extended into the blackness as if surrounded by clouds. He strained to see a fine line meandering down the tree line and into the valley at the base of the mountain. Whatever it was, Samuel believed it was proof something other than the horde created a path beyond the Barren. He committed as much of the landscape to memory as he could before sitting on the branch and resting. He looked down at the swaying heads of grey flesh and bone beneath him.

*They attract each other like powerful magnets, he thought. Too many to fight. There has to be another way.*

Before his mind had time to contemplate the thought, a swift motion caught his eye. The cabin door was flung open.

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"You think if he gets out in front of those monsters that he's going to repel the cloud, stop the reversion, and come back to save you? How fucking romantic," Kole said.

"We should leave the cabin now while they're distracted by Samuel," Major said. "We're not in a position to wait things out. Time is not in our favor."

"What is, chief? Every time we face a rotten situation, you lay some bullshit on us, something you've been holding back. Well, I've had enough." Kole stepped behind Mara and put his back to the door. "Nobody is leaving this cabin unless I open the door."

Mara stepped forward and slammed her balled fists into Kole's chest. He stood motionless. Mara winced as her hands lost the battle.

"What's it going to take, son?"

"I'm not your son, first of all. And for me to open this door is going to require some answers. Like right now."

"To what questions?" Major asked.

"Don't be fucking cute with me. You know what I'm talking about. I want to know how you've slipped reversions."

Major sighed and brushed his hand at Mara as if signaling that her attempts were futile. "Fine."

Kole nodded at Major and crossed his arms on his chest. He did not step away from the door.

"This isn't my first rodeo."

Mara felt a perplexed look creep onto her face. Kole shook his head at her, signaling not to interrupt the old man.

"And you ain't the first folks I found here. This is the third or fourth locality I've entered with a slip. Based on what's outside, I'd say it's the most depressing of the lot."

"You've slipped." Kole said.

He waited, expecting Major to explain why they hadn't done so yet.

Major nodded.

"So how do we slip outta this shithole?" Kole asked.

Major raised one palm and shook his head with a smirk. "Not so easy. If you want answers, you gotta shut up and quit asking me questions."

Mara smiled and Kole closed his mouth.

"The last one had only wolves, not the horde. It felt more like winter than whatever the hell we're in here, and it was forest as far as you could see. No mountains, hills, valleys. Just trees. I came across two people in that one. Two men, older. They had the growing paunch and shrinking hairline of middle age, although they didn't seem to know each other. I found them arguing on a path that led to the Barren."

"This place?" Mara asked.

"No," Major said. "It was a series of caves, but I think it served the same purpose. The men called it the Barren, and so that's what I called these cabins when I found them."

Mara shook her head.

"Don't know if it's the slips or the fact that I'm always landing in a locality that happens to be fighting a reversion—and I don't remember how I got there or where I came from. But I do know I didn't slip from my birth locality, what you guys might think of as your 'real world' existence.

"Anyways, the wolves eventually became like the undead and they served the same function. Whatever runs the different localities must reformulate in different ways, because the wolves did the same thing. They pinned us down inside the cave. If someone went out, they pushed 'em back in. I know what you're thinking, muscle man. I can see it in your eyes."

Kole smirked.

"I searched every square inch of the inside of that cave, and it was solid rock, no way out."

Kole stopped smiling.

"So we're in the same boat. One of the guys decided he would make a run for it, not sure if the wolves would get him or not."

"The wolves are here too, aren't they?" Mara asked.

"They are, sweetheart, and I'm not sure why or where they've gone. Maybe they can smell the rotting corpses out there," Major said with a light chuckle. "Good thing we can't."

"You said you got out," Kole said, trying to force the pace of the old man's story.

"Eventually. We tried a few times to get past the wolves. Hundreds of them blocked us in with fangs bared. Once we realized the cloud would get us before the wolves would let us out, things got desperate."

"How desperate?" Mara asked.

"Bad enough that the two men came to fisticuffs, almost the way our two meatheads did."

Mara looked at Kole, and he avoided her stare.

"The man that tried to get past the wolves had it all along. He just didn't know how to use it."

"Had what?" Kole asked.

"The talisman. It's a physical item that somehow punches a hole in the locale and sets you up to slip and to take others with you. I can't remember what mine were, but I

must have had them to get here. It's the only way of escaping the reversion. The kicker is I keep slipping into another locality that's in the same shitty condition. The cloud keeps following me."

Mara paused and looked at Kole. Major remained quiet, letting them process the information.

"You think one of us has a talisman that'll slip us all out of here?" Kole asked.

"Nope. He knows that neither of us has it," Mara said.

Kole looked at Major and then back to Mara.

"Then that means—"

"Yes," Mara said. "That means Samuel has it. And if he doesn't, we're all going down in this reversion."

Major sat back and folded his hands on his lap. He smiled at Mara.

"And you let him go They have needs to fulfillout there, carrying our key out of this place, to fend off the horde?" Kole said.

"It was a test," Mara said, pointing at the door, "and now Major has his proof."

Kole turned his head sideways as he looked at Mara. It never occurred to him the horde pursued Samuel because he was carrying the talisman. The creatures tried to devour Kole because he attacked them, but it was the talisman they were meant to isolate. If given the opportunity, the horde would have torn Kole apart, but not Samuel. Their role was only to contain him, protecting the talisman.

"So I guess it's time we get him back here and find out how he's going to slip us the hell out," Kole said.



## Chapter 12

The horde responded to the opening door with a consistent, sludgy movement. The creatures slithered toward the stimulus, dragging remnants of clothing and tattered flesh behind them. Samuel placed a hand over his eyes more out of reflex than necessity. No sunlight existed here to play with his vision. He saw Major, followed by Kole and Mara, stepping outside the cabin to stand shoulder to shoulder.

"What the hell are you doing?" he yelled.

Mara stepped down and ran to the opposite side of the cabin, drawing a portion of the fluctuating mass to her. Major yelled something to Kole, who dashed in the other direction, creating a narrow gap between the undead. Major looked at Samuel and waved him down.

Samuel noticed there were only one or two creatures remaining at the base of the tree. They both paced tight circles, bumping into each other, mindlessly moving like forgotten leaves tossed by the winter wind.

Major waved again, his motion more urgent this time.

"Damn it," Samuel said.

He turned for one final look at the path extending out of the Barren, blinking several times in hopes he could burn the features of the landscape into his memory.

He tied the loose end of the rope around the trunk of the tree, threading it over the top of the branch that held him aloft. He then checked to make sure the other end held fast around his waist. Like an expert rock climber rappelling down the face of a mountain, Samuel gripped the rope in both hands. He backed off the branch, using his feet to push outward while allowing the rope to slide through his hands. Samuel cried out as the friction of the rope on his palms began to burn. He descended in a lazy arc from the last push, and the rope slackened as his feet landed on the ground. Three of the creatures shambled in his direction, angling in a way that pushed Samuel toward the cabin. He cut the rope from his waist and ran to the steps of the cabin, where Major stood with his arms crossed on his chest. Kole came around the cabin from one side, and Mara appeared on the other. Like a drain clogged with blackened sludge, the horde oozed back out and around the cabin, encapsulating it. The creatures moved forward, tightening the noose, letting them know it would be best if they opened the door and went back inside.

"C'mon," Major said, waving over his shoulder.

He opened the door and stepped inside, followed by Mara and Kole. Samuel stopped and turned to face the rope dangling from the tree. He watched it sway back and forth, writhing like a snake. Samuel looked at the cloud above, and then to the unseen trail in the distance, before entering the cabin and pulling the door shut behind him.

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"I saw a path. East."

"It doesn't matter."

"Sure it does," Samuel said. "It's going away from the cloud."

"That thing will eventually swallow this entire locality. Going east on the path only buys us a little more time," Major said.

Mara and Kole sat on the floor, waiting for their heartbeats to subside after the dash around the cabin.

"Unless you have a plan for getting us out of here, I'm not sure what choice we have," Samuel said.

"You have something that will allow us all to slip with you. Get us out of the path of the reversion and land you in another locality. It might be a world degenerating faster than this one, but it'd be a different locality either way," Major said.

"I don't have much on me," Samuel

He didn't trust Major and was not about to submit to a search. Samuel thought about the fact that Major let him leave the cabin, knowing full well the horde would try to contain him. The old man knew Samuel wouldn't make it out of the Barren.

"Then it shouldn't take long to determine which object is the talisman."

Major stepped forward with a smile cracking the lower half of his face. Samuel stepped back into the wall without thinking. He felt the rough planks nibbling at the fabric of his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Samuel asked.

Mara stood and looked at her feet. Kole jumped up and moved beside Major.

"Just let us look at your shit. No need to get your panties in a bunch," Kole said.

Samuel exchanged glances with Mara. He saw a flicker of fear in her eyes.

"I don't need help from either of you," Samuel said.

He separated his feet to match the width of his shoulders. He bent at the knees and balled both hands into fists. Major stopped his approach and held both hands in the air, palms facing out.

"Calm down. This doesn't need to be messy. Once we determine which object is the talisman, you can try to punch a hole that slips all four of us out of here. I know how it works, and I can show you."

"No," Mara said. "It's a trick. They'll leave us."

The men looked at her as she trembled.

"What?" Kole asked with a sneer.

"Don't give them anything, Samuel."

Major chuckled and shook his head, treating Mara like an insolent child. He turned and spoke to Samuel.

"We're going to find the talisman, I'm going to show you how to use it, and then you'll get us all out of here just like you were doing in the tree. Except this way will work. There's nothing on that path out there but painful emptiness. More nothing until the reversion claims the last pathetic creatures here. It'll churn us in the cloud along with the horde and the wolves. If you're fine with that, then so am I. I've been punched through enough localities. I'm tired."

Kole stepped between Major and Samuel.

"Give Major the talisman, you little bitch."

When Mara's eyes met Samuel's, she knew what he wanted her to do.

She lunged forward, placing her hands on Kole's forehead and plunging her thumbs into his eye sockets. She felt his warm, moist eyeballs against the pad of her thumbs as he screamed in pain. Samuel raised a knee upward until he felt it stop against Major's pelvis. The old man dropped to the floor and pulled his knees to his

chest while writhing in the fetal position. When Samuel looked back at Kole, he was on his knees with Mara draped over his back. She removed her thumbs from his eyes while dragging her nails across his face. Samuel watched the crimson lines appear like whiskers. Before Mara could utter a sound, Samuel grabbed her by the wrist and spun for the door. He pulled it open to reveal the horde exactly where they had left them. Black orbs in gray faces lifted at the change in the environment. Samuel dashed forward, pulling Mara with him. They stepped outside the cabin, and before Samuel could slam the door shut, he heard Major.

"They won't let you leave," Major said. His voice sounded shaken, defeated.

"We can try climbing the trees and get back on the path to the other side of the Barren."

Samuel knew this would not work but he was not going to give up or let Major determine how he was going to leave the reversion. Samuel would rather be torn apart by the horde than leave his fate in Major's hands and he was not about to leave Mara to Kole's wrath.

Major's laugh slid into a ragged, choking cough. Kole remained on the floor with his hand over his eyes, blood seeping through his fingers.

"I'm not talking about the undead."

Samuel looked at Mara with his head sideways and eyebrows raised. Before they could speak, a distant, muffled howling came from the west, riding the black cloud that hovered above the Barren.

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"We'll never catch up to them."

Major pulled himself upright and placed a hand on Kole's shoulder.

"We won't have to. The pack will eat their flesh and leave the rest."

Kole rocked back and forth, his eyes running with a watery pink mixture of tears and blood. He blinked and wiped his face with the back of his hand. The lines drawn into his flesh by Mara's nails turned black as the blood coagulated and dried on his skin.

"She's not like us. We knew the time would come when we'd have to force the situation. We can't slip three," Major said.

Kole huffed and dabbed his face with the collar of his shirt.

"She tried gouging my eyes out. I want to hurt her. Bad."

Major stood and swayed as the nausea radiated from his groin into his lower abdomen. He sat down again.

"Samuel is like us," Major said, ignoring Kole's desire to inflict pain. "He slipped into this locality under the same circumstances as we did."

Kole shrugged, nurturing his wounds and festering revenge. "So what?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm not sure it means a thing," Major said. "But unless you or I get our hands on the talisman, well . . ." Major's voice trailed off.

More distant howls reverberated off the mountains, resonating back to the Barren, trying hard to puncture the oppressive silence.

"They're coming," Major said.

"Did you call them?"

Major leaned his head back to rest on the wall of the cabin. He did not answer.

"That means you did," Kole said. "I sure hope you know what you're doing, old man. Ain't like these are trained canines sniffing for drugs."

"Well, I've been trying to dig my balls out of my abdomen since he kneed me. Do you have any better ideas?"

Kole wiped another drop of blood from behind his ear and decided to shut up. Major had been beaten down by a man, but he had been bested by a woman, a flimsy girl.

"Yeah, me neither," Major said. "Besides, the pack don't know the deal. They're only working on animal instinct."

"You sure about that?" Kole asked.

"What's it matter?" Major said.

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"Don't stop," Samuel yelled as they dodged the oncoming horde that tried to reconfigure itself and block the path.

They sprinted for the tree, but several of the undead arrived first, making it impossible for them to climb the rope. Samuel recalled the view of the landscape, adjusting the altitude to fit where he was on the ground. When the howls rolled in underneath the dark cloud, Samuel pushed his legs to pump even faster.

"The pack. The alpha male. They're back."

"What are you talking about?" Mara asked as she followed Samuel, struggling to keep his pace.

"We've got to get back on the path and find ourselves another shelter."

Samuel didn't have time to consider why the horde was now allowing him to move freely. He was focused on getting Mara to safety.

Deva was accelerating the unwinding of the universe, pushing Samuel toward the cave in the east where the two would meet. Deva's powers grew stronger the closer he was to the last open portal in a reversion. In this place, that spot was the cave. Meeting there would give Deva more influence on the outcome, much like cell phone reception improves closer to a tower. So anything that happened in that cave would favor Deva. If the cloud swallowed Samuel before he got to the cave, it could dump him into an infinite number of unknown universes—and it could take Deva thousands of cycles to find Samuel again. Deva accepted the calculated risk.

Mara could only make out a word or two as Samuel ran, projecting his comments into the heavy, dead air. The horde started to recede as Samuel and Mara put space between them. No new creatures appeared from the west, which led Samuel to believe they could outrun the horde created by the cloud. He pushed the image of the alpha male from his mind, as well as the inevitable reversion that crawled ever eastward. He kept on the path, which was only visible for ten or fifteen feet into the distance. Samuel thought if a new group of the undead stumbled upon the path he'd have no choice but to run at them.

"Up there," Samuel heard Mara say as he dodged right to miss a low-hanging branch.

He saw the outline of a structure about ten feet from the path. Samuel traced the shape with his eyes and knew it was another cabin, almost identical to the ones he already discovered in this locality. When he took a few more strides, his hunch was confirmed. Samuel slowed and let go of Mara's hand. She leapt to his side as they both stood in front of the door.

Samuel turned to see the first of the horde coming into view, shuffling down the path in slow pursuit. More howls reverberated through the silent stillness until they raised the hairs on his neck. Mara looked at Samuel, and they made a decision



without speaking. Samuel stepped into the inky blackness of the cabin, pulling Mara behind him. He slammed the door shut, her sweaty hand in his and his heart hammering in his chest.

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Major opened the door to a desolate and empty scene. He had become so accustomed to the horde occupying the space that the Barren felt like an underwater realm, filled with a formless void of darkness and silence. The locality held no trace of its occupying army of the undead—it had pulled up stakes and set off on the path, following Samuel and his talisman. He could not muster a lick of concern over the girl. She was cute, like a pixie, punk-rock chick, but Major felt he was far beyond the ability to ever experience a crush again. While he felt no direct animosity toward Mara, he would gladly remove her if she was in his way.

The howls grew in intensity, but Major did not need verbal confirmation to figure it out. He could feel the alpha male coming. And the wolf was angry. He had been denied the hunt and the spoils.

“We going after them?”

The question broke Major from his thoughts. He turned to see Kole standing several feet back. He had dirty scraps of cotton in his hands to dab the blood from his face. Kole blinked constantly, and his puffy, red eyes looked possessed.

“Can you see?” Major asked.

“Yeah, enough,” Kole said.

“The horde followed the path, which I’m sure they used. Samuel said he saw it extend to the east on the other side of the Barren. No doubt he headed that way with Mara.”

Kole growled at the sound of her name.

“And now the pack is coming hard out of the west. Seems like we got ourselves a party.”

“What are we going to do with them?” Kole asked.

“It may not be up to us,” Major said. “If the horde or the pack get to them before we do . . .” Major let his sentence trail off with a shrug. “Hike up your boots, Sally.”

Kole bristled at Major’s insult and wiped another drop of blood from his face.

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Samuel had lost the ability to register sensations. He groped like a drowning man bobbing in the infinite ocean. He felt his eyes bulge and dry as he forced his lids open only to see nothing but blackness. He flailed his arms in hopes of striking Mara and verifying her existence, as well as his own. He opened his mouth and screamed, but the space stole the words from his ears. He sensed his body floating and stopped fighting the momentum. Samuel drifted until the images in soft focus came to life inside his head.

*“Another round?”*

*The bartender looked at him with his mouth slightly agape, the beginnings of a smile that would never quite blossom.*

*“I don’t think so, pal.”*

*Samuel shrugged his shoulders and looked at the young woman sitting next to him. She wagged her index finger back and forth while stifling a drunken giggle.*

*“C’mon, man. One more for me and the lady. We’re walking through campus after last call. Not like we’re getting behind the wheel.”*

The bartender rubbed the iron-cross tattoo on his outer bicep and snapped the dish rag down on the edge of the bar. He grabbed a clear, tall bottle covered in Cyrillic and poured two fingers of vodka into each shot glass.

"Six bucks."

Samuel reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a ruffled ball of paper money. He slapped a ten-dollar bill on the polished maple bar and lifted one shot glass with each hand.

"Thanks, man. Keep the change."

Samuel spun to face the woman on the stool next to him. Her face glowed, a mixture of alcohol-infused color and youth.

"Don't know if I'm going to be able to make it back to my dorm," she said, accepting the shot glass from Samuel.

He felt a bolt of electricity as her hand touched his. The charge traveled through his torso like a whiskey burn and settled in his groin with a slow smoldering. She moved her leg inside of his and ran her toes up his calf. Samuel looked down at her bare foot, untethered from her sandal, and fantasized about seeing her perfectly painted toenails next to his ears.

"You can always crash at my place. My roommates already left for the semester. Got the whole place to myself."

She smiled and let her eyes peek at Samuel's lap. She let the look linger.

"Certainly don't want you to be all alone now, do we?"

Samuel looked around the bar at the survivors. The underclassman and underage kids had binged through the early evening and had already been escorted home or put into a cab. The shot and beer regulars had not returned yet, although once spring bled into summer, they would come to reclaim their neighborhood bar, at least until dorm move-in day in August. For now, Samuel felt like the bar was his, and the people finishing their drinks in it belonged to him as well. He had taken the remainder of his finals yesterday and printed out the last history paper in the university computer lab that morning. Samuel's parents wouldn't be expecting him home for another week, and it would be a week after that before he'd be back on the assembly line at the factory, making enough money in the summer to pay for his books in the fall.

Pride motivated Samuel more than the promise of a good job or the adulation of his family, who marveled at him as he became the first to steer toward a college degree. In fact, Samuel believed most material possessions owned him. He had a car, a beauty of Detroit engineering. Samuel loved his 1988 Dodge Daytona, but he still had a year of payments left. He belonged to that car, or more accurately, to the bank that owned it. He spent long hours at the circulation desk. The countless stupid questions and disparaging glances from blue-haired librarians felt like a chain tethering him to a world he knew he was inevitably entering. The position as a circulation desk assistant came with a stipend which, to Samuel, was another way of getting owned. He savored the few moments in his life when he felt truly liberated, and this night was going to be the first in a string of six or seven that would belong to him and him only.

"I'm afraid of the dark, so maybe you could come into my room, tuck me in."

The girl smiled, which precipitated a burp, which turned into a full revolution ignited by the acidic burn in her stomach. She turned in time to project the vomit over the bar and onto the webbed plastic mat that kept the bartenders from slipping on the wet floor. She coughed and splattered like an old truck, and Samuel could do nothing but

*stare at the skin horizon that appeared under her shirt and above her shorts when she leaned forward on the stool. He studied the smooth, white skin, turning his head sideways. Samuel was glad she did not ruin that space with a tramp stamp, like most of the girls in college. He knew the '90s were just the beginning for tattoos, and he really liked the hot biker-chick look. But on this lady, he was hoping to slide in behind her and enjoy the unobstructed view of the beads of sweat that would collect in the small of her back. He imagined her long, blonde hair splayed out and falling down over the sides of her breasts. He would grab her hips and hold on for as long as the ride lasted.*

*"Get her out," the bartender said, unfurling countless paper towels off a roll and dropping them to cover the puke.*

*The remark and ensuing odor of sickness snapped Samuel out of his fantasy. He noticed he had been rubbing her back while she vomited, and his fingers had moved further south until they caressed the waistband of her hip-hugger jeans.*

Samuel blinked, returning him back to the present and his mental prison. He took shallow breaths, knowing the memory was not finished. He thought of Mara, wondering if she was being forced to relive a time from her past, the reopening of wounds that had never quite closed.

*He felt the warm, penetrating feel of her tongue in his mouth. Samuel pulled her closer with two hands on her hips. The alcohol killed the taste of vomit on her lips, but did not protect his nose from the odor of summer trash coming from the dumpsters in the alley.*

*"Right here. I want you right here."*

*Samuel put his hands on her breasts and pushed them up, feeling the stiffness of her nipples through the thin T-shirt. He looked into her eyes and saw the hazy glaze of 3 a.m. in them. The woman's head moved in stuttering motions as Samuel fought a losing war against the vodka shots.*

*"I have a queen-size bed in my room. We can do all kinds of stuff on that."*

*She grinned and slid her hand inside his jeans. Samuel moaned, tilting his head back against the wall until more loose mortar rained down on them.*

*"Get a fucking room."*

*Samuel and the woman looked down the alley at the opened steel door at the back of Joey's Grill. A short-order cook with a soiled apron and a cigarette dangling from his lips emptied a garbage pail into the dumpster with a wet smack.*

*"Get out 'fore I call the cops, or worse yet, 'fore Slimy Larry comes back to his cardboard house and stabs you both in the gut."*

*Samuel giggled, and the woman slid both hands around his waist.*

*"I can't walk no more," the woman said.*

*"I think I'm parked around the corner, at a meter."*

*She stepped back, lifting her head off his chest. She drew an index finger down over her bottom lip, smirking at Samuel before waving it at him. "Naughty boy. Gonna have to punish ya."*

*"The house is only a few blocks. I'll be fine. No faster than twenty-five, I promise."*

*The cook shook his head. He flicked his cigarette into the dumpster while stepping through the steel door, pulling it shut with a sound of metal on metal echoing through the alley.*

*“Kay,” the woman said. “But hurry.”*

*Samuel led her to the sidewalk. A few lonely souls skulked by, caught in drunken limbo. The bars had last call, and the breakfast restaurants hadn't opened yet. He glanced to his right and watched the neon sign of the bar flicker into cold darkness. He turned in the other direction and stared until he saw the taillights of his Dodge, the twenty-inch tires snuggling up to the curb.*

*He had done this before. Many times. Samuel knew the drill, knew his limitations like every good drunk. He would ease into the street, stay slow and keep to the residential streets. Avoid traffic. That would allow him to reach home safely. Intellectually, Samuel understood the risks he was taking, but the young college girl pawing at him skewed all of the statistics. He would return to his room and they would explore each other like first-time lovers. It was the aroma that drove him mad. Samuel could smell her.*

*“Lezzgo, silly,” she murmured, placing a hand in his lap.*

*Samuel shook his thoughts loose and put the key in the ignition. Fear slid across his face until he realized it was the wrong key. After four more tries, Samuel discovered the ignition key and started the car. The Dodge came alive with a throaty rumble after he pushed the clutch to the floor and pumped the accelerator three times. Pearl Jam's “Oceans” came through the speaker system, and the woman fumbled for the volume knob, turning it until Samuel felt like Eddie Vedder was singing to them from the backseat.*

*“Album of the year,” she said.*

*“This is killer. Not sure how Pearl Jam is going to top this record.”*

*Samuel fastened his seatbelt and looked over both shoulders before easing into the empty street. His body took over as if the effects of the alcohol, the slurred speech and the slowed reflexes had subsided. He looked at the girl and pointed to her seatbelt. Samuel wanted to see the way the nylon restraint would run between her breasts, accentuating her curves.*

*“I trust you,” she said. The woman closed her eyes and leaned back against the headrest.*

*Samuel put the Dodge in first gear and eased from the curb. The parking meter stared at them as they drove past, its cyclopean eye red and menacing. He coasted underneath the first traffic light, which blinked yellow in the pre-dawn darkness of Fifth Avenue, the main strip dissecting the quaint college town. The next set of lights swung red in the gentle summer breeze.*

*“Wazzup with these?” he asked.*

*The girl just mumbled.*

*Samuel waited and looked back and forth, wondering why the second intersection's lights had not gone to blinking yellow, and more importantly, why they were red in his direction. Before he could contemplate the answer, a dagger of light pierced his rearview mirror. By the time Samuel reached to flip his mirror to the nightshade angle, the vehicle was beside his.*

*The chrome side mirror captured the reflection from the copper street lights in a way that made it look alien. But it was the 1977 Chevy Corvette attached to the mirror that made Samuel forget about the sexual tryst he had in the works. The tinted windows and T-tops made him think the vehicle had to be from California. They did not have the need or the legislation to make that happen out here. Chrome side pips ran from the back of the front tires underneath the door until they flared out at the rear.*

*The black paint job glistened as if the car were wet. The 'Vette slowed at the intersection until four inches separated the passenger-side window from Samuel's. He waited as the Vette's window came down with the slow lurch of a handle turn.*

*"Dodge," said a voice from inside the Corvette.*

*Samuel paused and looked over at the girl. She smiled and then winked at him.*

*"Ain't even close. You got sixteen pistons under that hood. Over three hundred horses. Go pick on someone your own size," he said.*

*A voice came from inside the Corvette, hidden in the blackness. "No balls. I get it."*

*Samuel gripped the leather covering on his steering wheel.*

*"I can handle the lady too, seeing as how you ain't got what it takes to satisfy her."*

*Samuel looked at the light and back at the empty void of the Corvette's window. He nodded and turned his attention back to the dangling traffic light, anticipating the turn to green. He set his left hand on top of the steering wheel and dropped the right on the gear shift set between the seats. He revved the engine a few times and used his left foot to push back into the seat. Samuel took his right foot off the brake and teased the clutch with his left until he felt the gears of the manual transmission edging forward, pleading to open up into a full gallop.*

*When the light turned green, Samuel slammed the accelerator to the floor and popped the clutch with his left foot. The Dodge lurched forward, and he heard a giggle from the woman sitting next to him. The engine drowned out the passionate wailing of Eddie Vedder as the CD player moved on to play "Release." The rear tires of the Dodge screamed, and the acrid smoke of burning rubber reached his nose as the Dodge pulled him underneath the traffic light and down the right side of the street, now serving as a drag strip.*

*The Corvette appeared to hover next to Samuel's car, teasing and taunting him like an angry sibling. It stayed locked in position, using the oncoming lane as its own. Samuel heard laughing coming from the passenger window until it closed, drenching the Corvette in inky blackness.*

*Samuel glanced at his gauges, the needle pushing toward sixty. The blinking yellow lights at some of the intersections faded like fireflies in the summer night. He tried not to think about the people stumbling from the bars, witnessing the race. Samuel loved this college town. They knew him here. They knew his car.*

*The Corvette roared, and Samuel saw it lurch forward. He smiled and shook his head, frustrated by the driver's decision to toy with him and, at the same time, impressed by the sheer brutality of the Chevy's 305 block. He feathered the clutch to bring the RPM gauge back into the red before shifting gears.*

*Samuel watched the taillights of the Corvette move forward as his own speedometer broke the century mark. The two cars rocketed down the sleepy street like two bullets from a gun.*

*When the Corvette jacked low and dipped a shoulder into the highway onramp, Samuel realized he had to concede. He knew the Daytona did not have the handling of the Corvette, and he pulled the car to the curb, feeling the effects of the alcohol replacing the adrenaline of the race. He picked up the woman's purse and searched through her wallet until he found her ID, complete with home address. Samuel glanced at the woman and he turned the car around. He drove toward her apartment, where he would most likely need help to take her safely inside.*

*The race left him dizzy as its effects receded. Samuel would have to lick his wounded pride and forego the physical satisfaction of a sexual conquest. He found no*

*solace in doing the right thing.*

He felt her hand in his, tiny and vulnerable. She squeezed to let him know she was still there. The room came back into focus, and he recognized the same indistinguishable furniture that had been in the other cabins. Samuel's breath hitched in his chest. He stood in the middle of the room with Mara at his side.

"Did you see it?" he asked.

She nodded and wiped a tear from her face.

"I should have learned from that. It was so close to being a catastrophe."

Mara turned and trailed a finger down his cheek. "We all fall short. We all screw up."

Samuel brushed her hand aside and walked to the window. Blackened film covered the windowpanes as it had all of the cabin windows. He tried seeing out of one, hiding the rest of his tears from her.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Another cabin. Probably a little further down the path, but not too far from the Barren."

The moments preceding his visceral memory flooded Samuel's head. He recalled the shuffling horde of the undead and the distant but closing sound of the pack howling at the dead sky.

"Major and Kole. What do they want?"

"Not sure," Mara said, shaking her head. "I think Kole wants to inflict pain, and he doesn't care who he hurts. But Major, yeah, Major wants something more."

"More than what?"

"More than hurting you. He wants out of here. We all do."

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Kole and Major ambled along the path, weaving in and out between the creatures. Major expected to be blown back by their rotten filth, but the sense of smell had all but disappeared in the locality. Along with the loss of sound, he knew the reversion was almost complete.

"Can we get to them?" Kole asked.

"Yep," Major said. "Looks like the walking corpses will keep 'em pinned down. Won't hurt 'em none."

Kole nodded and kept walking, occasionally sidestepping a group of the creatures. He passed one on his left, looking deep into its face. Kole shuddered when the creature turned its blank eyes on him. He felt the desperation there, the pain.

"Think the next cabin is over that ridge," Major said.

Major pointed along the path in the direction the horde was traveling. A throaty howl broke through the silence and made the horde stop in their tracks. Major and Kole turned to face the alpha male striding along the path as the creatures parted, the wolf's eyes never leaving the staggering undead. Kole and Major stood between the wolf coming from the west and what was left of the place in the east with the undead lining the path like folks at a parade.



## Chapter 13

*You stole my prey, and now you must make recompense.*

Major stopped and looked at the alpha male. "I protected my investment."

Kole looked at Major and then back at the wolf. "What the fuck are you talking about?" he asked.

The old man brushed off the question with a wave of his hand.

*Where is he?*

"Up the trail. The horde follows, like you."

The alpha male stopped five feet in front of the men. The other hunters in the pack flanked him on each side until they stood blocking the path. The horde froze in place, swaying in the imaginary breeze.

*He has the girl?*

"She's with him. I'm not sure who has what."

Kole stepped up to stand beside Major. "Are you talking to these coyotes?" he asked.

"Wolves."

"Whatever. Can you really understand them?"

*Our pact involved you and you only.*

"I know," Major said, looking at Kole. "I know."

"What, man?" Kole asked. "What do you know?" He shuffled on his feet, clenching his fists and looking back and forth between the wolves and Major.

*We'll still hunt the man in order to fulfill His command, but we also want recompense for the delay. The girl.*

"I don't give a fuck about her."

*Then it isn't genuine, is it? We'll take him, too.*

Major felt the alpha male's mental nod toward Kole. "He is not mine."

"Hey, hold up. What the hell are you talking about?" Kole asked.

Major turned to look at Kole, his eyes hard, dark, determined. "It's out of my control," he said.

"What is?" Kole asked.

The alpha male padded forward and the rest of the pack circled the two men while the horde remained fixed. Kole looked at Major and then at the wolves, understanding seeping into his mind like water running over a dam.

"You can't do this," he yelled.

The old man shrugged and took a step back as the alpha male emitted a low growl, ears up and eyes fixed on Kole.

"This is not my doing. I'm a subject of this place, like you. I wouldn't worry about it. The reversion is going to swallow us all soon, anyway."

Kole gave Major a menacing look before tossing his bloodied bandages to the ground. A few of the hunters snuck forward and sniffed the blood as if it were an aphrodisiac.

"In a world losing all sensory input, you throw hungry wolves a handful of bloody bandages."

Before Kole could reply, the alpha male sprang forward. His lean body flew through the air toward Kole's neck. Kole raised a forearm, striking the alpha male on the head, deflecting his lunge with a whimper. The other hunters stepped forward.

*No. He is mine.*

"They want to prove themselves, the way you did. They want to fight their way to the top of the pack."

"Stop talking to them, you asshole," Kole said, spitting each syllable into the still air.

*Mine.*

The hunters stopped, but their eyes remained locked on Kole.

"Why are you letting them attack me?" Kole asked.

"I'm not letting them do anything," Major said. "They have needs to fulfill, like all of us, and they have beliefs about the reversion and what might stop it."

"Human blood?"

"Probably. But I'm not a wolf, so I can't say for sure."

The alpha male growled again, shaking its head and realigning its equilibrium after absorbing Kole's shot.

"What about Mara and Samuel? Let's sell them out."

"Mara," Major said, "is not worth a thing to me. Or them. But Samuel. He has something I need, and if I have to sacrifice you and the girl to get it, I will."

"This isn't fair," Kole said.

"Of course it isn't, you spoiled little shit. You've slipped into another locality, one damned for all time. Or at least until the reversion eats it. You were nothing but a disgusting human being in your life. Why do you think you're owed any decency now? Be happy you didn't slip into a place more violent than this. The alpha male will tear out your throat and you'll be dead in minutes. Trust me. There are worse fates for those like you."

*Enough.*

Major held both hands up and stepped backward. The pack stepped past him until they encircled Kole. The alpha male crouched down before him, ready to spring. Kole looked at Major with a bloody tear running down his face. He shook his head at the old man, but said nothing.

The alpha male launched himself through the air again. This time, Kole's defensive blow glanced off the beast's muzzle and into thin air. The wolf's paws landed on Kole's neck, pushing him backward until he lost balance and collapsed hard on the ground. The wolf opened its jaws and clamped down on Kole's throat like a steel bear trap. The wolf growled and shook its head until blood spurted from Kole's jugular. The man's eyes remained open as his body twitched in the dirt. When he no longer moved, the alpha male raised his head and howled into the darkness.

Major stood by, careful not to interrupt the alpha male and his hunters. He closed his eyes as the tearing of flesh filled his ears. The locality would devour the experience like everything else, but until that happened, Major had to live it. When the wolves finished their obscene feast, the alpha male nudged a hunter. The wolves gathered behind their leader amongst the horde still fixed to the ground.

*And now the other. The female is of no consequence to me. She has no power.*

"But he does, and you'd better remember that."



The alpha male looked at Major, blood staining his coat.  
*I know. I felt it last time. But that was before. I have become more powerful since.*  
“So has he,” Major said. “So has he.”

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“I think we’re here for a different reason. I think we have work to do, people we owe,” Mara said.

Samuel nodded, taking deep, long breaths. “Redemption?” he asked.

“Of sorts. Do you trust me?” Mara asked.

“I guess.”

“Give me your hand.”

When Samuel’s hand landed in Mara’s palm, she threw a shoulder into the door and exited the cabin. The horde surrounded them, but they stood motionless in place.

“Why aren’t they coming at us?” Samuel asked as they sprinted down the path and away from the reversion.

“A force has held them temporarily. They won’t remain immobile long. Hurry. Let’s get some distance.”

Samuel looked at Mara for a moment, realizing there was more to her experience in the reversion than what she told him. She let go of his hand.

Mara ran down the path, her dark hair swaying against her back. Samuel followed her as she continued moving east. The trees hung over the path like dangling fly paper, ready to snag them at any moment. Mara kept moving through the darkened landscape until the path opened on a plain that stretched as far as she could see. Long wheat stood still and silent. Samuel looked up and saw the reversion in the sky, constantly moving east toward the endgame.

“They’re not behind us,” Samuel said.

“They will be. Come on.”

Mara sprinted again, this time through the field toward a black hole on the other side. As Samuel drew closer, he realized they were heading for the gaping maw of a cave embedded in the deep rock of a mountain. The opening appeared as a solid wall of jet-black fabric.

“We’re going in there?” he asked.

She ignored his question and slowed to a jog. As she approached the entrance to the cave, the wheat tapered off until there was nothing but undisturbed dirt. Samuel felt the muscles in his body tighten, and he had to fight to keep his bladder under control.

“It feels evil,” he said.

“It probably is,” Mara said. “But it’s our last chance to escape the reversion. And the wolves.”

As if on cue, Samuel heard another round of howling. He looked over a shoulder and saw the first shapes shuffling from the tree line into the field. He recognized the gait and knew the horde was back on their trail.

Mara looked at him and took his hand again. She looked at the cave and back to the undead.

“It’s your call. I can’t make you.”

Samuel nodded and followed her through the opening, into darkness that penetrated him to the core.

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“I could use the horde to draw him out,” Major said.

*The undead. They avoid that place.*

"I know. Which is why we must get him to give up. You and your pack are not great enough in number to pursue them through the labyrinth."

*How did the girl know about it?*

Major felt an accusation in the unspoken question.

"They have been running for their lives, to the east. The reversion has pushed them there."

The wolf licked his teeth and circled back around to survey the hunters. The old man was right.

*You have bait he will take?*

"I have many tools at my disposal," Major said as a smile spread across his face. "I don't know if he'll leave the girl, but he will be disoriented, at the very least."

*Go. I will wait for you. But realize time here is short, and the reversion slows for nothing. I will not suffer another cycle by failing Him.*

Major nodded and stepped past a throng of the undead as they approached the cave. He tried not to look at their faces as he contemplated a strategy for luring Samuel out. And he needed enough time to find the talisman before the alpha male tore the flesh from his bones.

He couldn't remember when he struck a deal with the alpha male because communicating with the wolf was always tedious. The animal spoke with a limited vocabulary and used its few words in the wrong context. Major remembered enough to know the alpha was doomed to another reversion without capturing Samuel, and Major couldn't escape without the talisman. The wolf would get Samuel's flesh if Major received the talisman.

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What appeared to be a black hole from the outside softened within. Ancient stalactites and stalagmites bit into the cavernous space. The old rock glowed with a dull, heavy cast of grey light, as if it came from the final throes of a dying sun. The floor of the cave was covered with a fine powder, dry and unlike the heavy, moist soil of the forest. Passages extended in all directions, heading into the depths of the mountain.

Several of the walls wept. Trickling streams of water followed grooves etched in the stone over eons, the droplets crashing into puddles on the ground like cannon fire echoing throughout the space.

Mara stopped and looked at Samuel as they stood shoulder to shoulder, their backs to the entrance. She looked into his face, shuddering at the pale complexion brought on by the inner glow of the cave. When she turned to look at the cave entrance, she saw the darkness of the locality brought by the reversion, making it seem like a heavy curtain had been drawn across the last remnants of their world.

Samuel's eyes met Mara's. He let his breathing slow while surveying the inside of the cave. The glow of light produced phantom shadows that slithered over the pockmarked stone. He felt the cold, moist, subterranean air on his face and detected the faint aroma of wet limestone. The open passages reached out to Samuel like bony fingers threatening to pull him inside the mountain.

"Now what?" he asked.

Mara looked back to the entrance. She jogged to an outcrop of rock against the north wall of the cave, Samuel running behind her. She placed her back against the cool wall and then stood upright when it chilled her to the core.

"We can hide," she said.

"From who? For how long? I don't see how—"

Mara cut him off by placing her index finger to his lips.

"The horde hates this place, and I don't know why. I remember seeing them standing out front before, a long time ago, when I first got here. Kole and I were hiding in the trees and we saw Major coming out. But the undead, they weren't in here."

"What about the wolves?" Samuel asked.

"I don't know."

The air within the chamber changed as a slight breeze raised gooseflesh on their arms.

"What's the point?" The question came from the cave's entrance, echoing off the walls until reaching their ears in a concurrent reverberation. "You're only delaying the inevitable," Major said, his words drawing nearer.

"C'mon," Mara whispered.

She grabbed Samuel's hand and sprinted around the side of the outcrop. The two rushed headlong into the nearest tributary and raced through the kinked maze of stone until it ended in a solid wall of rock. Mara turned and ran back toward the main cavern, towing Samuel by the arm. She ducked into another passage, only to end up at another dead end.

"Go ahead and try them all. I'll wait. But the wolves, eh, not so sure about their level of patience. And the undead, not sure if they even understand the idea any longer." Major's voice came through the air with clarity. He was getting closer.

"What do you want?" Samuel asked as he stepped around Mara to face the entrance to the cave.

Major appeared from behind an outcrop. His hair appeared more silvery than before. He walked with a lurch, and the headband slipped lower on his forehead, making his eyes forlorn.

"There's a lot about this place that you don't know, son."

"So you're my father now, my caretaker, is that it?"

Major chuckled and waved a hand in the air. "You and the girl come out here so we can talk like human beings," Major said. "Ain't like I can do that with the undead or the pack now, can I?"

Mara shook her head and tried to pull Samuel toward a third unexplored passage deep under the mountain. He bit his bottom lip and stepped in front of her, pulling his hand from hers.

"Okay."

"I'm really a business man, Samuel. Once you understand that, I think you'll find what I have to offer will be a fair trade, one that benefits both parties involved."

"Don't trust him, Samuel. He's devious and manipulating. He belongs here. He deserves to be eaten by that cloud, swallowed by the reversion."

"Mara, dear, such ugly words from a tragic beauty."

"You say you have business with me," Samuel said. "Let's hear it."

"I had to bleed for you, Samuel. I took one for the team back there in the woods when the wolves were attacking. Me and the alpha male, we got our own little side deal contingent on getting you here, at this point in the reversion. I don't understand a lot of the bullshit that goes down in these dying worlds but I do know I had to get you here, now, to save my own ass. But I might be able to save yours too."

"Where's Kole?" Mara asked.

"The horde got him," Major said. "They were so busy with him they let me go on by."

Mara looked at Samuel, neither of them swallowing the lie.

Samuel scoffed and wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. "You have thirty more seconds before we run headlong into the mountain. If the reversion is coming, we'll go on our own terms, with each other. Judging by the ghouls that didn't follow you in here, and the limp you got going on, I don't think you're in a position to chase us down. What do you want, old man?"

"Fine. I've made many deals in my time, and I've always believed a certain level of civility helped to ease the negotiations."

"I never said we were negotiating. You're down to twenty seconds."

Major stepped forward, distributing his weight on both legs. He looked over a shoulder at the entrance to the cave, where dark coats of fur had begun to pace at the threshold.

"They're scared of it. Won't come in. Yet. The wolves and ghouls will wait, but I won't. I need to slip again, and you have the talisman to do it. I don't know what it is, but it doesn't matter—you're going to slip with me. I've done it before, slipping with someone else. It's risky, sure, but no more risky than remaining here in this dying place. And the girl, well, it would be good business to leave her for the wolves. She's flickering out, one way or another."

Mara shivered and reached for Samuel's hand.

"I don't even know if I can slip with another. And if I did, why would I take you? I can take Mara with me."

Major laughed. His voice echoed throughout the cavern and brought a yelp from one of the pack that strayed too close to the entrance.

"And how are you going to do that, Samuel? Tell me. Exactly how are you going to slip into another locality, let alone find a way to take her with you? You may have the talisman, but I have the know-how," Major said, tapping the side of his head with his index finger. "You got the car, but I got your keys." A dark, greasy smile spread across Major's face.

"You're an evil son of a bitch," Samuel said.

"We don't have time for empty insults, young man. You get the knowledge of the slip in return for my ticket and the girl. Take it or leave it."

Mara glared at Major.

"How do I know you really know how to use the talisman to slip this locality? How can I be sure you're not tricking me?"

"You don't," Major said, fighting laughter. "You can't be sure. When do you ever get certainty in life? Thought you'd at least wised up to that in your time here."

Samuel turned and tucked his chin to his chest. He used the back of his hand to caress the side of Mara's face. She closed her eyes and pulled his hand closer with her own.

"Can you trust me?" he whispered.

Mara nodded without speaking.

"We do it on my terms," Samuel said, spinning to address Major.

"If we don't get going soon, there aren't going to be terms to follow."

Samuel took a deep breath and nodded at Major.

"First thing you need to do is stand with your arms outstretched," Major said.

Samuel followed the old man's instructions. He walked to the center of the open cavern while Mara remained with her back to the limestone.

"Good. Now close your eyes and visualize another place. Think white, sandy beaches and palm trees. Any locality without a fucking cloud would be perfect."

Samuel closed his eyes, and his face wrinkled as if he were devouring lemons. "I can't. My mind is racing. I can't think."

Major stepped closer and spoke under his breath, so only Samuel could hear. "If you can't do this, big man, that little tart of yours is going to become a meal for the pack. And you and I won't be far behind. Close your eyes and try again."

Samuel clenched his fists and brought them down to his waist before stopping and letting them fall against the sides of his legs. He concentrated, trying to clear his head of the distractions in the cave and the desperation of his situation. The air surrounding him lightened, and he felt a faint breeze blow across his face.

"Don't open your eyes," Major said, as if reading his mind. "That'll break the connection. Keep going."

Samuel forced his mind clear again, and this time a pinhole of light appeared. He watched it grow behind his eyelids and dart back and forth like a chaser in his vision. Samuel could see the edges becoming fuzzy and rolling back from the center, like sand pulled out by the tide. He lost sensation in his limbs and could no longer tell if he was standing or lying in the limestone dust on the floor of the cave. Major's voice cut through, as if the old man were inside his head.

"You got one, boy. You grabbed onto another locality. Now let it open up and make sure it's not all brimstone, lake of fire, or any of that other biblical bullshit that keeps Christians in the pews every week."

Samuel blinked within his vision without opening or closing his eyelids. He watched the center spread until the fuzzy border pushed out to his peripheral vision. Samuel had to remind himself to breathe. He stood on the shore of a narrow, long lake. The water sat like a sheet of ice, reflecting the towering mass of earth above it as if another mountain existed inside the lake. Tall pine trees bordered water that cut its way through a high mountain pass. Patches of snow clung to the ground in places hidden by shade. He saw the wind push the pine trees, nudging them into each other with a gentle shake. Samuel couldn't hear a sound and he was about to tell Major he saw no sign of life when a dark dash pinned to a deep blue sky came across his field of vision and stopped at the top of the tallest pine. He watched the bird spread its wings and take flight in the opposite direction, and Samuel was able to identify it as a hawk.

"Is it alive?" Major asked within his head.

"What?"

"The locality. Is there a cloud? Is a reversion coming?"

Samuel went back to his vision, searching the landscape with all of his senses, even ones he did not realize he had.

"Seems okay."

Major laughed, and Samuel heard the slapping sound of his hands coming together.

"Perfect. The next thing you need to do is focus on a point inside that locality. Find a rock, a tree, something physical you can latch on to. This is your coordinate for the slip, in a manner of speaking."

Before Samuel did that, he spun around inside his vision to find the best perspective possible before attempting anything. When he faced the west, Samuel felt it before he saw it. The unmistakable baffle choking the light and life from the sky. He saw tendrils of slate swirling in the blue sky, turning it grey.

"Yeah, this place looks perfect. Let me find us a decent landing pad."

Major snipped with excitement, and Samuel felt him temporarily exit his mind. He hoped Major would not take it upon himself to serve Mara to the wolves.

"I'm almost ready," Samuel said. "What's next?"

"Walk to it. Touch it. Hell, lick it if you have to. Get yourself a physical connection to the object there, which will help target the slip. We won't land on that fucker, like Plymouth Rock, but we'll be damn close. Make sure it's not too close to water. I don't wanna get my hair wet."

Samuel realized he could shut Major out, like closing a door or hanging up the phone. He reached out to Mara, still inside the cavern.

*"Hey," he said.*

*"Samuel?" she asked.*

*"Listen, and don't speak. When he gets close, push him in the back."*

*"But I don't know what you mean—"*

*"Mara. Stop. We don't have time. When he gets close, push him. Do you understand?"*

Samuel felt her head nod. He switched communication from Mara back to Major.

"I will not miss the howling of those wretched beasts. And the goddamn horde can rot in hell. Let's do this."

The portal from inside Samuel's head hovered above the ground inside the cave. The opening rose up ten feet and expanded to a length of twelve. He felt as though he was sitting on top of a cloud, looking out of a bay window on another world below. The ambient sunlight spilled from the portal and illuminated the cave, chasing the wolves even farther away from the entrance and forcing their retreat into the forest. Major and Mara held their hands over their faces to protect their eyes from the blazing light they hadn't seen for so long.

Mara stepped forward and made eye contact with Samuel. He winked and then turned to face Major.

"Sure is a beauty, eh? I knew once you conjured the portal nothing would stop you from slipping this locality, not even your little Goth princess over there. I'm sure you wouldn't mind some young pussy, but even that ain't enough, right?"

"Just do it," Samuel said. "I want out of this filthy place."

Major nodded and lifted his chin at Mara.

"Let's go, hon. You belong to the alpha male now. Sammy and I are going to send you a postcard, don't you worry."

Mara dropped her head to her chest. When she raised it, tears streamed down her face.

"Can I just look at it for a minute before you two go?"

"I don't see no harm in that," Major said, lifting his shoulders at Samuel.

Samuel shrugged and stepped back from the edge of the portal to allow Mara and Major space to step up to it.

"Take a look at that beautiful, virgin land," Major said, gazing upon the eastern end of the distant locality.

Mara inched forward. She shook her head, more tears following. Major stepped to the side and put an arm around her. He whispered into her ear.

"Could be dinosaurs with eight heads in there somewhere. But you know what ain't there? This place. This stinking shithole ain't."

Major stepped forward and spread his arms as if to embrace the vista. He tilted his head back and let the natural sunlight ease the tight scar tissue on his face.

"Now," Samuel yelled.

Mara had taken two steps back from the edge and one to the side, positioning herself directly behind Major while he was basking in the glow of the portal. With her dark, straggly hair covering all but her piercing eyes, Mara lunged forward with both hands. Her palms struck Major's black overcoat like a slap to the face. She locked her elbows and extended her arms, driving her weight through the push and forward toward the open portal. Major gasped as the shove knocked the air from his lungs. He stumbled forward and almost regained his balance when his left foot slid on the loose limestone and into the portal. His left leg dropped, and his body torqued to the side as whatever force ruling the portal sucked Major in like gravity would from the precipice of a cliff.

Samuel saw the shock and the anger in Major's eyes as his body slid farther into the portal, alone. His fingers grasped the fuzzy edge of the vortex, and he pulled his chin up to them.

"You fucking liar," he shouted. "I swear to God I'm coming back for you, you son of a bitch."

Samuel closed his eyes again. When he reopened them, Mara stood by his side, both of them staring at the cavern wall where an open portal to another locality used to be.



## Chapter 14

*He will not trick me again.*

The hunters from the pack circled their tails, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. Strands of saliva fell from their muzzles, turning the dark soil even darker. Some hunters growled, while others kept their gazes low to avoid signaling a challenge to the alpha male. The wolves' yellow eyes cut through the darkness with laser precision. The alpha male pulled back from the cave entrance when he no longer felt the elder's presence, fearful of what it could mean.

*He is gone from here. Banished.*

The pack kept moving, agitated and weary.

*The end arrives soon.*

The horde had gathered at a safe distance behind the pack. More creatures emerged from the trees, off the path, and from other hidden places within the locality. They clumped together, swaying back and forth, blotting out the trees and the ground with their swelling numbers. The horde became a living organism comprising thousands of unthinking beings. The edges oscillated like a giant cell membrane. The reversion kept advancing from the west, raking the horde to the cave like a pile of leaves.

The alpha male trotted to a rocky outcrop several yards from the cave entrance. He wound his way up the shards of stone until he stood fifteen feet taller than the rest of the pack. The wolf looked out over the field, where the horde replaced the wheat, still teetering back and forth as if pushed by an invisible hand.

*So many.*

The hunters paced underneath the outcrop while waiting for the alpha male to come back.

*We must pursue. We must descend into the womb.*

The hunters wailed, gnashing their teeth and snapping at each other's tails, all the while knowing none among them could challenge for leadership.

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"What did you do to him?" Mara asked.

Samuel stood still, staring at the dark-grey wall.

"I gave him what he wanted."

She shook her head. "How did you do it?"

"I'm not sure," Samuel said.

"Can you do it again?"

"I'm not sure," he said again.

Mara turned and took a few steps toward the front of the cave. She approached until the yellow eyes of the wolves danced in the darkness beyond.

"Between the wolves and the horde, we're not getting out of here."

Samuel nodded. In a recess, he noticed an array of angles foreign to rock. Samuel stood and walked toward them. As the inner glow of the cave cast light on it, Samuel



discovered a small pile of broken tree branches and twigs. He gathered them in his arms and walked back toward Mara. He dropped the bundle and began to arrange them into a leaning pile.

"They're very damp. But it's worth a try."

Mara smiled when she realized what he was doing.

She helped arrange the wood as Samuel dug in his pockets for the lighter. He could not remember if it had always been there or not. Samuel felt that sludgy feeling returning to his head, slowing his thoughts and forcing him to think hard about simple tasks. He recognized the feeling as the same when the noose first dropped him into this place, and he wondered if this was how the end would come. If the reversion would rewind everything, even the thoughts and experiences in his head.

"Go ahead and try," Mara said.

Her words shook Samuel and he wondered how long he had been hovering over the firewood with his thumb on the lighter.

"I don't even know if the lighter works."

Mara shrugged her shoulders and sat cross-legged on the ground. Samuel lowered his hand and flicked the lighter. Sparks caught and ignited the fluid in the reservoir. The flame appeared with a green tint, warm instead of hot. He touched the flame to the smallest pieces. The wood cracked and sizzled but failed to catch.

"It was a nice thought," Mara said, her face betraying her words.

"Not sure how long it would have lasted, anyway. It's not like there's a stack of firewood in here."

She nodded in consolation.

"It was there, too," Samuel said.

Mara waited, sensing Samuel was speaking to himself as much as he was to her.

"I saw the cloud in the portal, which is why I knew I was slipping him into that one. If it had been paradise, like a picture of the steel-blue waters of the Caribbean you see on office calendars, I'm not sure what I would have done."

"You saved me."

Samuel huffed, discomfort wracking his face.

"I really don't know if I can summon a locality or if it's all chance. I don't even know if I can open a locality other than that one. Major could be waiting for us when the next portal opens."

"Then we won't be any worse off than we are now, right?"

A howl followed by a series of growls made them both turn to face the entrance.

"I have a feeling they're coming after us at some point. When the reversion gets right up close, these wolves are going to get over their fear of this cave."

"I agree," Samuel said. "And if the horde joins in, we'll have our hands full."

Samuel watched Mara tuck a lock of black hair behind her ear, and he thought how sophisticated she would look in middle age. He imagined a shimmer of gray by her ear and a slender hand pushing her hair away from blue eyes that resonated with laughter and experience and life.

"Do you think Kole is dead?"

"Yes," Samuel said. "Whatever that means here."

"He was broken," Mara said. "On the inside."

"Aren't we all?" Samuel said.

"His pain was so deep he couldn't live without it."

Another howl, this one more intense and louder, echoing through the cave like a gunshot. Mara watched Samuel's face contort as though she could see the memories floating back to the surface of his mind.

"I was sick. Middle of winter, aches, the flu, the whole thing. We had been married for quite a while at this point, kind of shed the little kisses and light touches of the first few years."

Mara flinched, and Samuel could see her holding the pain inside the best she could.

"I was in bed and having a hard time falling asleep. We had a big mattress that left a lot of space between us. She reaches over and starts gently rubbing my back with one hand. This was not foreplay. There wasn't any of that happening that night. She did it because she wanted to, and those couple of minutes of contact felt like a million dollars. It's that feeling I miss. I ache inside for the intimacy that comes through years of friendship, disagreements, shared experience. It's more than sex and more than physical contact. It's a spiritual connection between two people, unspoken, real and powerful."

Samuel looked at Mara as she wiped tears away with the cuffs of her sleeves. "That's what's dead here. That's what this place is missing. And if it is, maybe the cloud needs to eat it. The reversion needs to do its job and sweep this place from existence."

"It's love. I wonder why you can't say that word? Everything you described is love. Do you think it still exists elsewhere?" Mara asked.

"Why? Why do you think it has to? Maybe love died like the summer breeze and the sound of gulls soaring over open water. Maybe love is lying in its grave with sunlight and goodness and righteousness," Samuel said.

"It has to exist somewhere else," Mara said. "If I didn't believe it did, I'd walk out there right now and offer myself to the wolves."

"But does it exist for us, Mara?"

"We're here for a reason," she said.

He thought about that for a moment. "I don't know why I'm here," he said.

"You do, Samuel. We all do. Some of us haven't remembered it yet."

Before Samuel could reply, a howl from the alpha male brought them to their feet as the wolf's silhouette appeared at the threshold of the cave.

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The cloud continued its death march across the empty sky. The rolling swirls of slate and obsidian pummeled the air. All but a sliver of the eastern horizon remained untainted by the reversion. It dropped toward the surface like a heavy curtain. The cloud pushed down, placing a pillow over the face of the last remaining motion in this world. The silence overpowered everything, and distant vistas disappeared within the coming storm of nothingness.

The trees of the locality leaned inward, exhausted from the continuous pull of the reversion. Some leafless branches touched the ground in homage to the unstoppable force engulfing the land and everything in it. Some could not fight any longer, their trunks snapping and toppling the head of the tree to the forest floor, leaving a ragged trunk sticking up from the ground like a broken tooth.

The horde remained, most fastened to the last piece of solid matter. As the reversion continued to churn from the west, the horde began to revert as well. Clumps of undead flesh fell from their bodies in silent mounds of rotted bone. Teeth and hair

trickled from the creatures' heads, followed by limbs no longer strong enough to withstand gravity, the lone natural force left virtually untouched. Scraps of clothing long ago turned into dirty, gray remnants floated to the ground in silence. Some of the creatures standing on the edge of the clearing collapsed on themselves, leaving a pumping, empty jaw on the ground spewing nothing but meaningless silence.

The pack suffered along with the horde. The alpha male's hunters hunkered down in a clearing not far from the cave, but several remained motionless and still for far longer than natural. Two of the hunters lay with their noses nuzzled underneath their tails, the rise and fall of their chests no longer visible. The alpha male strode amongst the wolves and noted the change, one he felt within.

*It must be now. Nothing will remain.*

Of the six hunters with their muzzles in the dirt, three stood in response to the alpha male.

*The horde shall join. There is not much will left in the dead flesh, but it is His command.*

The hunters growled and circled their leader. They paced back and forth, staring at the black hole in the mountain. The alpha male trotted forward and circled around. Three dozen members of the horde shuffled, their legs dragging them toward the entrance to the cave. Several more attempted to march until their atrophied bones dropped them to the ground in a pile of dirty fabric and grey flesh. Seeing the movement, the alpha male looked into the sky as it closed in on the tops of the few trees brave enough to reach up.

The alpha male brought his ragged army to the edge of the clearing until he could feel the subtle exhale of the mountain coming through the mouth of the cave. He paced back and forth, growling and snapping at the air.

*Come out. We are not done.*

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"We can't stay here."

"I know."

Mara lowered her head and wrapped her arms around her torso. Samuel moved closer to the entrance, where silent movement caught his eye.

"The alpha male is calling me out. He must sense the end of the reversion drawing closer."

"I'll come with you. I'll fight, too."

Samuel smiled at Mara and nodded, knowing she would do so regardless of what he said.

The water running down the walls of the cave intensified, but silently. Samuel turned and paced the edge of the walls, his eyes searching for anything that could be of use. Mara watched and then did the same, starting at one end of the main cavern until she worked her way back to Samuel. Neither gathered anything useful.

"Think, Samuel. Can you reopen the portal in a different locality than the last one?"

Samuel closed his eyes and let the nothingness encompass his inner vision. He waited without hope, knowing the knowledge to open a portal was escaping him, like the old horror movies when the car wouldn't start no matter how many times the ignition was turned.

"It's there, but I can't access it. I can't say if I could open something, and if I could, I'm not sure where we'd land."

Mara looked toward the entrance, where several of the hunters joined the alpha male in his pacing, accentuated with growls.

"Maybe this is not our last stand. They don't seem to want to enter here, the wolves or the horde. Maybe we push through the cavern and go deeper into the mountain."

She wrinkled her nose in disgust and shook her head back and forth. "I'd almost rather have my throat ripped apart by the wolves."

Samuel nodded in understanding. "It could come to that anyway. Let's try to avoid it, but we may have a last stand."

Before Mara could answer, the alpha male crossed the threshold with a yelp. His cry broke the silence of the reversion like the crack of a whip. The other hunters followed, all enduring the hurt caused from crossing over into the cave. The horde came next, slugging forward and oblivious. They shuffled in single-file, arms dangling and heads cocked to the side as if held to their shoulder by an impenetrable force.

"C'mon," Samuel said.

He ran into the labyrinth of tunnels that led deeper into the mountain, hoping to avoid the dead ends. He heard Mara's breathing and her feet slapping against the dry powder on the cavern floor. The growling of the wolves came too, reverberating through the cave not far behind.

Samuel dashed left and then right until the tunnel narrowed. He felt it drop downward as gravity helped propel him forward. Samuel reached out and steadied his gait by using both hands to guide himself deeper into the cave. Several times, he felt the scree from Mara's feet hit the back of his legs, which propelled him faster.

The cavern twisted and turned, the tunnel clamping down on the two refugees like a slowly closing iris. The utter darkness kept Samuel from lunging forward faster than he would have liked.

"Wait."

He stopped, surprised words still carried through the dying air of the locality. Samuel felt the icy touch of Mara's fingers on his back as she came up behind him.

"Listen."

They stood in the black silence, hearing nothing but their own exaggerated breathing.

"Maybe we lost—"

Before Samuel could finish, a howl penetrated the air and rang in his head with the force of a thunderous church bell. He knew it was the alpha male and the pack was closing the distance.

Mara pushed him, and Samuel picked up the pace. He felt an aching in his lower back from running in a crouched position and wondered how long it would take for the muscle cramps to drop him to the ground in agony. The chasm continued ever downward and became more of a pipe than a tunnel. Samuel bounced his head off the cavern's ceiling of the rock above, and he was forced to draw his arms in closer to his body as the walls crept inward. He felt Mara behind him, and he also felt her impatience. Samuel imagined her thin frame navigating through the space faster than his, and the frustration she must be feeling as their pursuers would come upon her first. He pushed on as the jagged edges of the rock drew blood from his battered knuckles. Samuel led them down another passage that widened enough to allow him to run again, but—still crouched. He heard Mara breathing hard a few feet behind.

The tunnel dumped them into another open cavern, although it wasn't as expansive as the one inside the entrance to the cave. Samuel ran to the center and spun in time to see the tunnel toss Mara out. She scrambled and stopped next to him, the space illuminated by an eerie glow coming from the walls. Samuel thought he could feel the stone lowering in an attempt to snuff him and Mara from the locality.

The alpha male's cry came again, this time closer. Samuel swept Mara behind himself with one arm as he readied for the onrush of attackers.

*Now we finish and He releases us from our duty.*

The alpha male picked through the passage until his head appeared in the darkness, like a newborn entering the world. The rest of the animal came next, along with three more wolves. Samuel could not see the horde, but figured they were on their way as well.

"I don't know what you want from me," Samuel said.

Mara craned her neck forward, unsure if he was talking to her or not. When she saw the alpha male and Samuel's gaze directed at the wolf, she stepped back and listened.

*But you do. We are hunters, and you are our prey.*

"And the horde? What role does the undead play in your hunt?"

Samuel felt a mental chuckle come from the leader of the pack.

*Beacons. Markers of our prey. They follow the misery and consume what is left behind by the hunters. The horde will fight for the scraps.*

The alpha male stood seven feet from Samuel, his hunters forming a semicircle, blocking the passage leading back toward the surface. Samuel looked over his shoulder and saw two tunnels on the opposite wall.

*You may enter those, but we will find you.*

"The reversion is coming and it will destroy you, too."

*There is nothing the sky will bring that will cause us more pain.*

"Back in the cabin, you attacked. . ."

Samuel let his words hang, unsure whether or not it was a question the alpha male could answer.

*It only delayed this meeting.*

"So you expect us to lie down while you tear out our throats?" He felt Mara's hands on his hips as she moved closer to him.

*No, but it shall come to that.*

Samuel shifted, his muscles tensing and adrenaline flooding his system.

*What have you done with the scarface?*

Samuel smiled, sensing what could be a slight crack in the wolf's stone will.

"Banished. Opened a portal and sent him through it."

*He will return. He has unfinished business with you as well.*

"Not without me, he won't."

*You will go to him, whether you desire it or not.*

Samuel caught motion beyond the wolves. He looked at the black velvet curtain of darkness and saw a humanoid shape breaking through. The first of the horde appeared, one arm missing and another dangling by a strand of ligament. The creature's head sat askew, with the top portion missing as if one of the pack had torn it away.

Mara came closer. Samuel could feel her nervous fingers gripping the back of his shirt.

*I am sure you are not.*

"Let's go," he said, turning and pulling Mara with him.

They sprinted for the tunnel on the left and dashed through the darkness.

*You will tire.*

Samuel ignored the alpha male and pushed through the passage until it narrowed to a place where he was forced to drop to his knees. He imagined the pack coming upon them, lunging with full force while they supplicated.

"What did he say?" Mara asked.

"More of the same," Samuel said.

The passage emptied into another natural space. This one, however, appeared to be circular, without another corridor or passage springing from it. Mara and Samuel stood, his back creaking with the motion. They spun all the way around until they realized there was no way out. The alpha male padded around several smaller rocks and stopped, waiting for the rest of the hunters to flank him again.

*Now?*

Samuel shook and balled his fists at his sides. Mara walked backward until she felt the frigid stone on her back like the breath of the dead.

Within moments, the first members of the horde entered the space and remained behind the alpha male and his hunters. The subterranean tunnels continued to glow with an ambient light that allowed Samuel and Mara to see the shapes, but it dimmed significantly from the aura cast closer to the surface.

"I would rather try to slip anywhere than let you taste our blood."

*Go ahead.*

Samuel closed his eyes, unsure what mental capacities he used to open the portal for Major. He felt the frustration mount as if he were a diligent pupil disappointing his teacher. Mara began to cry softly, holding the sobs to her chest with both arms.

The alpha male turned his nose to the ceiling and barked at the hunters. They stepped forward and pressed closer to Samuel and Mara.

*Enough. It is time to finish.*

Samuel bent at the waist and crouched, his feet and shoulders spread. He raised his fists into position and stepped toward the alpha male. The two warriors moved to the center of the space while the rest watched.

"Wait," Mara said, stepping from the wall. "Wait, Samuel."

He turned to face her and the alpha male cocked his head sideways.

"Come here."

She extended her hand, palm up. Samuel looked at the alpha male, the hunters and the horde. He looked back at her and saw the conviction in her eyes.

"Please, Samuel. Come here."

He reached out and felt the power pulse through his body as their hands locked.



## Chapter 15

*"Another round?"*

*Samuel blinked and looked down at his folded hands on the polished, mahogany bar. He blinked again at Mara sitting next to him on the stool. She wore her hair bundled on top of her head, curls dangling on her cheek like onyx earrings. The dark mascara accentuated her eyes. Her red lipstick could hypnotize any man. Samuel looked at her foundation, delicately applied to her porcelain skin in a way that defined gothic beauty. He felt satisfaction, contentment, even a peaceful calm emanating from her.*

*"Where are we?" he asked.*

*Mara winked and turned to the burly bartender standing before a wall of mirrors and bottled spirits. She ignored Samuel's question and answered the bartender's.*

*"Yes. For both of us," she said.*

*With a swift swipe of his rag, the bartender smiled and cleared the condensation left by the previous round. He turned to toil and clang bottles together while ice clinked in the bottom of the glasses. A thin layer of sweet tobacco smoke hung just below an intricately carved ceiling. Ornate posts straddled the bar as patrons moved about.*

*"Don't know the name of the place, but it's really old. They built the bar before prohibition and then opened it up again afterward. Most of it has been restored. Even the ghosts that haunt it have come back."*

*Mara winked, catching the light in her eyes with a dazzling smile. Her brilliant teeth shone between ruby lips. Samuel felt mesmerized by her beauty, and yet a deep sadness seemed to reside below the surface, one that hurt like an ache in his chest.*

*"You look stunning," Samuel said. He felt as though he was gawking at his sister dolled up for prom.*

*"Thank you," she said.*

*Samuel looked down at her bare shoulders sitting atop a tight, black dress. Mara wore ankle bracelets and toe rings that glistened in the light.*

*"Are we still in the cave?" he asked.*

*"This is it, Samuel. Our first and last date, if you want to call it that."*

*Samuel felt his face blush from that awkward feeling again.*

*"The wolves, they—"*

*Mara cut him off with the wave of a hand. Before she could reply, the bartender returned with two glasses filled to the brim with sparkling ice cubes suspended in a clear, amber sea.*

*"To us. Our time together and, sadly, our goodbyes."*

*Mara held her glass up. Samuel lifted his to the toast and watched her lips caress the glass. She siphoned half of the drink on the first sip before setting it back down. People moved about, navigating through the bodies clumped near the bar. Samuel looked at them looking at him.*

*"Goodbye?"*

*"Of course. The wolves, the horde. Shit, the reversion. It's all coming to a head. You know that, right?"*

*Samuel shook his head and rubbed a hand across his chin.*

*"We can still say goodbye," Mara said. "I've always liked this place, and I've always wanted a special little black dress. Shame I'm only getting it now."*

*"We have to fight our way out of the cave."*

*Mara snickered and held her hand over her mouth to stifle the laughter, as if trying not to embarrass Samuel. "You will. You still have work to do. But me, Samuel, I'm finished. There isn't anything left for me."*

*"But the portal, a slip, I could—"*

*"No. No, you can't. I'm not leaving the cavern, Samuel. I won't be able to slip with you and try my luck in another locality. This is it for me."*

*Samuel looked around again, feeling as though everyone in the bar was about to yell "surprise" as party hats appeared in the room. He felt the tension of secrecy and the pain of being left out of it.*

*"How do you know that?" he asked.*

*"I got word. I know. I've done what was asked of me, and now I'm out. That's how it works. You'll see." Mara drew another sip of liquor over her glistening lips and winked. "Forget it, Samuel," she said. "I can't explain it to you and, even if I could, you wouldn't understand."*

*"I'm done," he said, a serrated edge to the words. "The date is over, and this entire bar can fuck off. Put me back in the cave with the wolves and the undead."*

*"Done with what?" Mara asked. "That's one thing about us Americans, right? We want everything tied up perfectly, no loose ends. We want all the answers and logical reasons for everything."*

*He sat back as Mara's eyes began to shed tears from each corner.*

*"We demand a happy ending and for shit to make sense. Well, let me tell you something. It ain't like that. Sometimes you don't get to find out why. Sometimes shit doesn't belong to you."*

*Mara slammed the glass down on the bar. Samuel looked around and noticed the place was now empty. Even the bartender had disappeared.*

*"I didn't mean to—"*

*"I know what you meant to do," she said. "I know what your intentions were. But that doesn't matter, either. You know what they say about the path to hell and how it's paved. And if you don't, you know now."*

*When Samuel looked up at her face, he saw the healthy shine of her hair degenerate into the filthy, sweaty strands lying on her forehead. The eye make-up disappeared, as did the layer of foundation that accentuated her smooth skin. The sexy, black dress morphed into the rags that hung from her emaciated frame.*

*"Wait, Mara. I don't understand what you want from me."*

*The mirrored walls slid downward into the pools of mineral water gathering at the base of the cave wall. Ornate columns and brass poles turned into teeth of rock hanging from the unseen ceiling of the cavern.*

*"Nothing, Samuel. I don't want anything from you. It's about what you're willing to give, not what is demanded of you."*

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*He blinked once, and the cavern snapped back into view. Mara stood by him with tears in her eyes and his hand in hers. The alpha male crouched low, his hunters*



surrounding him, with the horde continuing to march into the space until enough appeared that Samuel could begin to smell their rotting flesh.

*If you give me your neck, I will make it pass quickly.*

Samuel shrugged and shook his head at the alpha male.

"I don't know what it is," he said while casting a confused look at Mara, "but I know I can't lie down for you. If you want me, you'll have to fight."

The hunters growled and snapped their long teeth into the air. Mara let go of Samuel's hand and stepped backward until she felt the wall behind her.

Without warning, the alpha male lunged at Samuel. The hunters stepped closer while the horde remained in place, swaying even in the absence of wind. Samuel spun and raised his hands into a defensive position, using his fingers to grab the alpha male's coat while turning to the right. The movement took advantage of the wolf's momentum and allowed Samuel to toss him to the side. The alpha male yelped as he crashed into the stone wall. Samuel reached a hand to the empty sheath still attached to his leg and cursed the reversion—Samuel could not remember losing the knife, yet it was gone.

Mara stepped to the side, and the other hunters stayed with her. Samuel struck at the alpha male with his foot. The kick connected with bony ribs, which elicited another cry from the wolf.

*You are not leaving this cave.*

Samuel felt the pain in the wolf's telepathic communication. He shook his head and lunged forward. This time, the alpha male anticipated the kick, dodged to the side and locked his jaws around Samuel's ankle. The wolf snapped its head back and forth while ripping Samuel's pants below the knee.

Mara cried, and Samuel turned in time to see the three hunters on top of her. He saw her legs kicking and arms flailing as the beasts attacked.

"No," Samuel yelled, dragging the alpha male across the floor toward Mara.

The alpha male released his grip on Samuel's ankle, which brought an immediate wave of relief followed by the cold burn of torn flesh exposed to the air. Samuel felt blood pooling in his shoe and fell to the ground when his leg would not obey the signals sent by his brain.

*I must leave you both to Him.*

Samuel sat up, his left hand clamping around the pant leg now saturated with his own blood, looking at the shuffling horde.

"What are you saying?"

The hunters moved back. The alpha male barked, and they continued past the standing undead and left the cavern.

*We have done what was asked of us. We have released her. I would have rather eaten the flesh, but that command will not be given.*

The alpha male trotted by Samuel and around the undead. The wolf stopped in the tunnel and looked back at Samuel.

*He that commands will fulfill the contract and release us from the grips of the reversion. The other beasts, they seem to be destined to be eaten by the cloud.*

The alpha male stared at him for another second before turning and disappearing into the darkness of the cave.

Samuel looked at the horde. The creatures inside the cavern remained in their animated sway. He clawed at the dirt, dragging his injured leg behind as he crawled

next to Mara, whose breathing came in ragged gasps. The wolves had torn ragged chunks from her arms and legs, which bled openly.

"I'm going to save you," he said.

Mara smiled, even as he recoiled at the sight of her wounds.

"I'll last longer than you think. The reversion. It slows even death."

Samuel smiled, his face contorting between sadness and pity.

"Deal with the horde."

Samuel took her hand and looked up at the sentinels standing in the cavern, their lifeless orbs staring back at them both.

"I don't know what to do."

"You'll figure it out." Mara winced, trying to staunch the flow of blood with strips of fabric ripped from her pants.

"I need help. You know things about this locality, this place."

"It's time," she said as the creatures came toward them.

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Samuel slid his left arm underneath Mara's right arm and she grabbed his shoulder as they both hobbled on injured legs. With his right, he grabbed a crooked stick from the ground to use as a club. Samuel took a deep breath as he felt the blood pulsing in his ears.

"This is the only way," he said.

"Go on," she said, gritting through the pain.

The first thirty feet through the passage proved to be the most difficult as Samuel tried to keep his balance. A creature appeared occasionally, arms outstretched, until Samuel would strike it with the club. He struggled to climb the rising incline of the passage while supporting Mara. He shifted as best he could, but their pace was slow at best.

When he reached the first intersection inside the mountain, Samuel glanced back at the horde behind him. New arrivals came through the tunnels at a trickle, giving him time to strike and then step over them.

"Hurry," Mara said. "Not much time left."

Samuel moved forward into the tunnel that led upward toward the surface of the locality. Samuel thought about that, and wondered what good it would do to race to the surface of a world about to be demolished by the reversion. Before his rational mind could answer, he took more steps toward the surface.

He let the club swing next to his right leg as he climbed through the tight passages. Samuel turned several times, Mara slowing with each step. When he reached another tunnel, Samuel stopped. He let Mara slide to the ground, careful to keep a hand near the back of her head to prevent it from striking the stone wall. He placed his hands on his knees and drew as much air into his lungs as he could. Before Samuel stood, he heard a rotten voice speaking as if from the grave.

"Our last stand is here. We cannot let you pass."

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Samuel gazed at the form slathered in darkness. The voice felt different, yet it retained a familiar timbre. With another glance at Mara, he stepped forward, gripping the makeshift weapon in his hand. The color fell from her face as more of her life bled from the wounds. The entity stepped to the side and into the glow cast by the cave. Samuel shook his head and wondered how long the ambient light would last as the

reversion bore down. With a quick glance, he looked at Mara's wounds, which appeared deeper and more serious than his own.

"You remember?" the form asked.

"We spoke of *ahimsa*, *moksha* and rebirth. On the edge of the marsh," Samuel said.

The creature nodded and stepped closer.

"The reversion has exhausted the horde, broken them down. You will not need that any longer."

Samuel looked to his hand holding the club and then back over his shoulder at Mara.

"Nothing will attack her," the creature said, following Samuel's eyes.

"You're different."

"Than you?"

"Yes. But different from the horde, too," Samuel said. "You speak with more authority in your voice, more experience."

"Maybe you hear that as less threatening. I came to you in the marsh to try to explain the universe, or as much of it as you could comprehend. The others—" The creature waved a hand in the air. "The others are bound by their duty, their *dharma*."

The last word hung in the air, and Samuel felt the familiar twinge of memory. He thought back to his conversation with this entity.

"Aren't you, as well?"

"Yes, but not the same *dharma*."

The creature stepped closer and motioned for Samuel to sit on a wide, flat rock near the wall of the cave. He looked at the opening and then back to the rock.

"It is swallowing what's left as we speak. You are free to run into that if you so desire."

Samuel shook his head and sat down.

"Some call it the path of righteousness, but I find that misleading. It has nothing to do with right or wrong, only duty."

"What can I call you?"

A smile burst upon the creature's face, contorting it into a grin reserved for Halloween jack-o'-lanterns.

"You may call me Deva."

Samuel nodded, waiting for Deva to continue.

"The Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, they all incorporated *dharma* into their belief systems, but it is much more ancient than that. Those in the West liked to call it fate, but even that is a misnomer."

Mara groaned and turned her head. She was sitting, but her eyes were now closed. Samuel stood, looking at her and then back at Deva.

"She will not worsen while we speak."

"What about her condition after?" Samuel asked.

"That is why we're speaking," Deva said. "Please sit back down."

Samuel did so, wringing his hands.

"There is a natural order of things, an *ṛta*. Your *dharma* corresponds to this order. In your case, and in hers," Deva said, nodding toward Mara, "you must answer to it."

"Of course the Hindus used *moksha* to reinforce the caste system, which put thousands of people into the gutters of their cities, but the idea behind *moksha* was you would be rewarded for pursuing your own *dharma*."

"In the Rig Veda, the teachings claim that *dharma* is not just law or harmony, but it is pure reality. 'Verily, that which is *dharma* is truth'."

Samuel watched Deva smile again, as if his own words began to reawaken a lost humanity inside.

"What does this have to do with me? With the reversion?"

Deva nodded, feeling chastised for his own intellectual indulgence. "Your *dharma* includes the woman, as well as the man you sent through the portal. Until you deal with both of these souls, your *dharma* will not be fulfilled."

"I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with either of them," Samuel said.

"Neither do I," Deva said.

Samuel stood and kicked at the limestone powder coating the cavern floor. He put his hands over his head and rested them on top.

"Major's gone," he said.

"He's coming back" Deva said.

"What about the horde?"

"They were to bring you to this moment, this place. That is why they no longer serve the locality."

"The alpha male and his hunters too?"

Deva shook his head but did not elaborate.

"When the moment arrives, you will fulfill your *dharmic* responsibility, or you will be reborn in the cycle tied to your fate. It is how the universe will be. It is how it has always been."

Samuel felt the blood rush to his face. He dug his nails into his palms.

"That doesn't explain shit."

"Who owes you an explanation?"

The question knocked Samuel askew, like a punch to the jaw.

"Then there doesn't seem to be much of a reason for you and me to be talking."

Samuel turned his back on Deva and walked toward Mara.

"There is one more thing."

Samuel stopped and looked over one shoulder. Deva waited, unmoving. Samuel turned and came back to stand in front of the undead creature.

"The old man. Major. He will return soon, and if you do not defeat him, your soul will be lost to this locality, destroyed by this reversion."

"I thought I already did that. I dropped him through the portal and shut it."

Deva shook his head.

"His *dharma* binds him to this locality, like you. He is coming back, and you must face him."

Samuel spotted the club on the ground and reached for it. Deva kicked at it, the stick clanking off the rocks as it skittered into a dark recess.

"You'll need a weapon with *dharmic* power. That will not suffice against the man."

Samuel waited, anticipating more from Deva.

"We are bound, Samuel. Our forces have unresolved energy that will carry through this cycle."

Samuel stood, trying to decipher Deva's cryptic speech. Before he could ask a question, Deva extended his arm. Samuel saw the strips of fabric and flesh dangling from the bone.

Deva turned his palm upward and opened his hand. There, glistening in the reflected light, sat the Scout, the knife Samuel buried in his father's coffin, and the one

that returned briefly to this locality. He grabbed it from Deva's palm and then bowed.



## Chapter 16

Mara heard Samuel speaking as if he were under water. She identified a second voice, but couldn't recognize it. Her body ached, and she wanted nothing more than to sleep, but the pain would not allow it. She listened to the cadence and rhythm of the conversation without comprehending it.

The cave began to take on a shimmering light. She felt an energy pulsing through the rock and running through her entire body. It wasn't until she opened her eyes that she recognized the power.

The floor opened like the gaping maw of a fantastic beast. The darkness swirled about the portal like water pulled down a drain. The image in front of her resurrected long-lost lectures in science class about dark matter and black holes, immense voids that would not allow anything to escape gravitational pull.

She tried to scream, to warn Samuel, but the force burrowing through the floor of the cave stole her words. She writhed in pain, moaning in a vain attempt to attract his attention.

Mara pushed herself up onto her elbows. Her head felt light and unstable, as if it could roll off her shoulders at any time. She squinted at the cave entrance until two forms materialized in her vision. After blinking, one remained, and it moved toward her. She could feel Samuel's presence at the same time the black hole continued its rapid expansion inside the cave.

The water flowing down the cave walls stopped and dried. Chunks of stalactite broke free from the hidden ceiling and crashed down to the floor like arrows of stone. The entire cave moved as if shaken by an unseen hand. Even the ambient light in the cavern pulsed and faded as if a malevolent force worked to extinguish what meager warmth it provided. The floor of the cave thrummed, and Mara caught a whiff of sulfur so overpowering in the sensory deprivation of the locality that it caused her to dry heave. Her ears detected a hum that increased in intensity until it became nothing but a wall of excruciating sound threatening to split her skull in two. She grimaced and placed her hands over her ears while rolling in the dirt. Mara wished for the pain to end as the black hole expanded. The edge crawled closer to her corner of the subterranean room. Mara passed out. Samuel stood, his feet riveted, as the portal ejected a man from within.

"Sup, Sammyboy?" Major said.

Samuel looked at Mara and then back to Major. He stood on the edge of the portal, which danced with blue and purple light. The headband and overcoat remained intact, but Samuel thought Major looked tired, worn out. When he looked back to Deva, the creature was gone. Samuel felt the handle of the knife in his hand and knew it was not a reflection or a visual construct of the powers in the cave.

"You didn't think pushing me through there was the end for ol' Major now, did ya? I happened to land in a spot a little nicer than this one. Had me a talisman in the palm

of my hand and now I'm back to get the most powerful one for myself, the one that'll get me out of these damn reversions for good."

"This isn't about you," Samuel said.

"Oh, I think it is. See, you tried offing me, boy. I've spent enough time around thugs and killers to know when that happens. You didn't give me a Columbian necktie or a pair of concrete shoes, but you tried doing me just the same."

"Mara is hurt bad. I don't know what to do."

"Fuck her and fuck you. I don't really care what happens to you or your little girl. I need you to slip us both into a brandy-new locality before that cloud outside tears up this cave like it's done everything else. Nobody I met here in this place got the mojo you do, boy."

Samuel squinted and raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, you haven't been outdoors in a while, have you? C'mon and take a look. I won't bite," Major said.

Major stepped away from the portal. Samuel looked at him and then back to Mara.

"Seriously. She's as good as dead. You and I got unfinished business. Frankly, I don't care what you do with her."

Samuel nodded and walked toward the entrance to the cave as if he approached the edge of a city skyscraper roof. He felt the empty blackness before he reached the threshold.

Samuel remembered the military videos he had seen in his youth, the ones filmed in the American Southwest during atomic-bomb trials. This reminded him of that.

The cloud had lifted somewhat, which allowed a view of the landscape across the field, and all the way to the base of the mountain in the distance. Most of the trees lay on their sides, with gnarled root balls jutting from holes in the soil. The swaying wheat from the field lay flat like the massive crop circles that appeared in England. Even the mountain in the distance appeared bare, tired and lonely like a hunchbacked man waiting for death. Between the surface and the bottom of the cloud light hung, much like the light generated inside the cave. It gave Samuel enough to see the landscape, as if it were created with software for a child's movie about fairy tales gone horribly wrong.

The movement inside the dark cloud coalesced into silvery streaks of motion that resembled serpents. Samuel thought all those ancient myths about flying, feathered snakes now seemed a bit less foolish. Silent lightning bounced between spots in the cloud, while the air felt heavy and still at the surface. Samuel scanned as far as he could see, but detected no life. The wolves were hiding or already eaten by the cloud. The horde, along with Deva, did not show their faces if they even remained. Samuel regained a sliver of his sense of smell, although he wished he hadn't. The dying world smelled and tasted like cold, wet cigarettes. As he stood, gazing upon a world that was never his, the cloud inched closer to them in a slow, methodical descent.

"The last phase. Seen it a few times, closer than I care to admit. Luckily we got you, so you and I can sell our front row seats to the shit-storm."

Samuel turned and saw the spreading smile on Major's face. He wanted nothing more than to pummel that look from his skull, but knew Major wouldn't let that happen. He came back from the banishment in the portal, and he had knowledge about this that Samuel did not.

"What happens when the final curtain comes down?"

"Not really sure," Major said. "Heard some stories in other localities, but it's always hard to verify. Not like someone's gonna get video of it on their phone, right?"

The reference to the ordinary made Samuel wince. He thought about the phone, the television, the car, and all of the other supremely boring everyday items in his life. He wanted nothing more than to feel normal again. It was not the extreme high points he missed while being abandoned in this place, but the little stuff. He wondered if he would ever have that chance again. He dreamed about standing on a frost-covered driveway in the bright sun of a February morning. He smiled when picturing the brilliant green of the lawn in the first few weeks of spring. He could almost taste the bitter jolt of a hot cup of French roast coffee.

"You with me, pardner?"

Samuel nodded.

"I'd love to stand here and watch the world die like they sang about in that Everclear song, but I don't want to go down the drain."

The pop-culture reference was another dagger in Samuel's heart. He remembered how much he missed his music, even the free stuff from friends.

"I'll hear you out."

"Damn straight. Not like I'm giving you a choice. I'm being a gentleman."

Samuel huffed at Major's self-proclamation.

"We both know you can open the portal. We both know you can slip, with my help. We both know there ain't much time left before the cloud sucks this place dry. But only one of us knows the girl's gotta be left behind."

"I can't do that," Samuel said.

"You're going to have to, son. I ain't never seen someone slip more than one other person, and I sure as hell ain't getting left behind."

"So you'd leave her here to die?"

"She's already dead, brother. Don't ya get it?"

Samuel shook his head. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Where do you think you are? This ain't Wyoming or Montana or some other heavenly wilderness."

Mara moaned. Samuel looked at her and then back to Major.

Major sighed and walked to an outcrop of rock. He sat on it and put his head in his hands. The old man looked out of the cave and back at Samuel, shaking his head.

"I guess we ain't getting where I thought we would."

"No," Samuel said, as he stared at Major, his eyes as solid as the walls of the cavern. "We're not. I've got another plan. I spoke with Deva."

Major laughed, slapping his knee with one hand. "Deva? What the fuck is that? You talking to Aretha or Mariah out here?"

Samuel waited for Major's snickers to die off before continuing. "I think he might control the horde."

"Nobody controls the horde, son. Just because the storm is coming doesn't mean I can claim I sent it." Major stood and brushed the front of his overcoat. "I'd love to continue your education, but I seriously don't give a rat's ass about it. We need to slip from this place before it's too late. If you can't do that with me, I'm just as happy to go it alone."

Major pulled a dagger from underneath his coat. In the other hand he held a tire iron. "They're not *Lord of the Rings*-caliber weapons, but they'll be enough to get the talisman from your dead body."



"What if we try slipping three?" Samuel asked. He had to resolve the action he was about to take by exhausting all possibilities first.

"Cloud ain't gonna wait for us to talk through this like a couple of grade-school girlies. Give me the talisman."

Samuel looked down at the knife in his palm. He felt the familiar texture of the handle and the weight of it. He knew the blade was no match for the dagger in Major's hand, but he had youth and fitness on his side.

"That's not going to happen so I guess there isn't much left to say," Samuel said.

Major nodded and spread his feet shoulder-width apart. He crouched low, his beady eyes peering from beneath the edge of his headband. Major held the dagger in front of his face while the tire iron dangled from his other hand.

Samuel gripped Scout in his hand and took a step toward Major. He looked at the old man's face and waited, giving one last pause. Samuel had not been in many fistfights as a kid, but he could never forget the concoction of fear, anxiety and adrenaline that surged through his veins before one started. He felt his tongue stiffen in a dry mouth, and the muscles in both his arms twitched. When Major shook his head, Samuel knew the time for negotiations had ended.

Major swung the dagger in a lazy arc, cutting the air with the sharpened blade. He brought it back and forth, carving a safe space between him and Samuel. The tire iron waited, the cold metal knowing the time for bashing would come soon enough. Samuel stepped closer, keeping his blade upright in a defensive block, although he thought one full swing from Major's dagger would break his own blade. He bent down to pick up a rock in his left hand.

"You're desperate, boy. Last chance."

Samuel ignored Major's words and swung hard with his fist closed around the knife. Major stepped back to dodge it and came around with a kick to Samuel's knee. The blow from his boot made him wince. Major watched as he dropped the rock to grab the damaged ligaments. When Samuel squatted, Major came across his shoulder with the tire iron. Samuel fell sideways, and his head crashed into the powdery dirt of the cavern floor. The tire iron felt like it had cut a burning hole in his shoulder, which helped to distract him from the pain in his leg.

Major stepped back and waited. Samuel writhed on the ground as Major waited for him to stand. When he did, Major brought the tire iron into Samuel's midsection, where it struck his ribs. They both heard the bones crack before Samuel felt the searing pain. Samuel doubled over and dropped Scout on the ground.

Major stood and straightened his back. He glanced at the entrance to the cave, looked at Mara's still body, and then at the back of Samuel's head, now curling in toward his knees as he lay in a fetal position on the ground.

"There ain't much time left. If you don't slip us now, I'm going to kill you and take my chances flying solo."

Samuel lifted his head. He looked at Major's eyes through a wall of silent tears but did not respond.

"So be it," Major said.

He brought the tire iron up above his head, lining up the back of Samuel's skull. As he held it aloft, Samuel flipped over and threw the rock into Major's groin. The old man let out a muffled cry as the chunk of limestone collided with his most sensitive area, causing him to drop his arm but not the tire iron. Major staggered backward as the

blow stole all of the breath from his lungs. He turned sideways to spew what little remained inside his stomach.

Samuel recognized the lull as his last opportunity to survive the fight. He pushed himself up into a hunched position, willing his injured leg to withstand the weight of his body. He drew his good knee back and drove it upward into Major's abdomen. The old man didn't see it coming because he was puking. Major fell backward into the dirt, as did Samuel when his leg gave out under the strain. Samuel crawled closer and spotted Scout in the dirt. His fingers clenched the handle of the blade. Samuel aimed the point at the back of Major's right leg. He reached forward and sliced across the back of Major's boot, just above his heel, severing the Achilles tendon. Major screamed and dropped his weapons as his hands went toward the wound.

Feeling on somewhat more equal footing, Samuel rolled backward to avoid Major's random flailing weapons. He pulled himself into a sitting position and tried to breathe through the fissures in his ribs. He thought about the countless stories he heard about hand-to-hand combat where a broken rib punctured a lung and the combatant drowned in his own blood. Samuel rubbed his hand along his side, hoping the pointy bones were not poised to do the same to him.

Major could not hold back his cries. He blinked, determined not to let the pain overtake him and force unconsciousness. The thudding force in his abdomen caused several more dry heaves, while the burning pain above his heel made it difficult to even roll over. Major reached for his dagger and brought it to his chest while forcing himself over onto his back. He used his palms to push up into a sitting position, with the cave wall supporting his back.

Samuel rose to his knees and then to his feet as his injured leg threatened to send him crashing into the floor. He held Scout in his hand and locked eyes with Major.

"I guess this is how it's going to end for you," he said to the old man.

Major shook his head. "The girl. I think she may have stopped breathing."

Samuel looked over his shoulder at Mara. He had a hard time making out her form as the cloud descended even farther, the blackness spilling inside the cave like slow-moving, black ooze.

"Look. Her chest isn't moving."

Samuel shook his head and screamed. The cry of frustration filled the cavern and reverberated throughout the passages. He looked at Major and then turned to check on Mara.

The sudden jolt of pain delivered to the back of Samuel's head knocked him to the ground. Before his body crashed into the stone, he regretted turning his back on a wounded animal.

Major crawled toward him after placing a lucky throw at the base of Samuel's neck. Samuel saw dashing lights sparkling in his vision, while his stomach prepared an ejection that would be arriving soon. He tasted the bitter limestone in his throat and blinked it from his eyes. He could see Mara's feet and he giggled, thinking of the witch's feet extending from underneath the house in *The Wizard of Oz*. The movie scene overlaid his perception in the cave as the rock to the back of his head scrambled reality. He dug his nails into the dirt and pulled his body toward Mara. Sounds swirled in his head as he thought he heard music coming from the reversion outside. Guitar riffs traveled on the floaters in his vision as his senses, which had been dulled for so long inside this locality, came alive. He shook his head and spat a glob of saliva into the dirt, where it sat before being absorbed by the dryness of the powder.

*Get up, Samuel. Get up now, or Major is going to finish you off and leave this locality over two dead bodies. Get up.*

He heard the voice in his head as loud as if it were being yelled into his ears. It sounded like everyone and no one at the same time. The voice felt familiar but other-worldly. He managed to turn his body over and blink as his double vision registered two men crawling toward him on their knees, each holding a dagger in his right hand.

Major staggered and stood, using the tire iron as a makeshift crutch. He slumped to one side like a shanty amidst urban decay. He raised the dagger, deciding to use the force of gravity to drive it through Samuel's chest.

"We are running out of time, my boy. And I don't think I've got another lucky throw in this tired arm."

Samuel blinked as the blow to his head turned from disorienting to painful. He tasted more dirt in his mouth and hoped to spare a few more seconds until the ringing in his ears subsided enough for him to think.

"You got a hell of an arm," Samuel said, his words slurred.

Major winced and recalibrated his stand. The tire iron was not long enough to provide the support he needed for his severed tendon. Samuel watched the man's eyes and knew the pain was dulling his appetite for conversation.

"It's too bad you weren't interested in having me as a travel partner. Think we coulda had some times," Major said.

Samuel watched as the dagger came up higher. Major bent his knees like a swimmer on the block, waiting for the sound of the starter pistol. Samuel gripped Scout in his right hand, where cold sweat gathered along with the adrenaline.

Major leapt forward and brought the dagger down. He landed on top of Samuel, their eyes meeting. Their bodies remained motionless like lovers in an embrace. Neither spoke. Major's mouth opened, but blood flowed from it instead of words. Samuel looked to his right where Major's dagger stuck in the hard ground of the cave. He felt the warm trickle surrounding the hand that held Scout firmly lodged in Major's chest. Samuel shifted his weight to the left and rolled, pushing Major's body off his own. He left Scout inside Major, no longer feeling it served any purpose for him. The old man blinked, his hand resting on the hilt of the knife.

"I tried. I really tried. If you had just stayed there."

Major coughed, spurring blood over his lips and down his chin. He let out a low cackle and shook his head back and forth. "Let yer conscience go, son. This is how I was going out, not banished to another locality like some surly teenager sent to his room." Another wracking cough made Major stop. His ragged breathing reduced his speech to mere whispers.

"I've gotta check on Mara," Samuel said, running a hand through his hair. When he looked back at Major, the man's eyes remained open in the long, glassy stare of the dead.

Samuel pushed away. His injured leg felt like a thousand pounds, and he continued to fight through double vision. Major's words echoed in his head, forcing Samuel to think of his own childhood and all of the expectations he could never fulfill. He began to cry, a few tears at first, until he sobbed. The reversion continued to creep into the cave, unaware of his tender, emotional state.

"Goddammit," he said to nobody in particular.

Samuel knelt and looked back at Major. The man's corpse remained unchanged, his right hand wrapped around the handle of the blade that had stolen his life

essence. Samuel looked over to Mara and couldn't tell if her chest was moving.

He felt the air pressure inside the cave change. The billowing cloud that had roiled overhead when he first arrived in the cursed forest had descended to nibble on the tips of the trees. He remembered it eating the light from the sky as it moved west to east. Samuel tried to calculate the number of days he spent in this locality, but he came up with nothing but a head-shaking guess, as if he were cataloging the events of a distant dream. Now, the cloud blotted out the entrance to the cave in a swirling mass of dark matter. It looked like a heavy, black velour curtain hung behind the walls, sealing the intestines of the mountain off from the carnage brought by the reversion.

A constant humming came through the stone. It drew an energy through Samuel that reverberated in his ears. It felt almost electrical, as if a microphone started to feedback through a mismanaged speaker system. His other senses began to awaken as well. Samuel could smell the dank limestone mixed with the scent of human blood. He felt the sticky dampness on the back of his head, and licked the coppery blood from a gash on his hand. His injuries came alive, each demanding attention from his brain, which continued to function through the head trauma. He was not sure why the reversion would provide a final burst of brain activity as it extinguished what remained. Samuel pictured a video from a science class in middle school. He could see the crude animation representing a supernova. The star swelled, and the intensity of its glare brightened beyond its capacity to sustain the millions of molecular activities taking place in its core. Samuel remembered how the dying star bathed the surrounding void of space with brilliant light before it contracted upon itself. He shuddered at the thought of the implosion that would eventually create a black hole, a negative energy so strong that not even light would escape its grasp. Whether or not he believed he could escape, Samuel chuckled at the thought of the reversion sweeping through this world, turning it into a real black hole.

He shook his head and shuffled toward Mara. Samuel did not think she had moved since he fought with Major. He knelt down at her feet, collapsing to his knees. The vibrations coming through the cave walls intensified and began to pressurize his ears. He opened his mouth wide and held his nose while exhaling, trying to release the pressure as if he were on a commercial airliner.

"Samuel?"

He flinched and looked up from the ground. Mara's eyes fluttered in the dying light. Samuel reached for her hand.

"Hold me," she said.

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Samuel waited longer than was necessary. Mara gasped, inhaling the air as if it were full of thorny barbs. He glanced back at Major's body before smiling at her.

"He attacked me. Threatened to kill me and find the talisman on my body."

She nodded. "He's gone?" she asked.

Now it was Samuel's turn to nod.

"The cloud? The reversion?"

"Clamping down."

Samuel told Mara about how the reversion threatened to consume the mountain and cave the way it had everything else.

"What now?" she asked.

Samuel paused and drew a deep breath.

"I opened that portal for Major. Not sure how, but it opened, and I know I could get us in it."

Mara shook her head. He could see the pain in her eyes and the struggle it took for her to move even that much.

"Not me, Samuel. I won't be going."

"Don't say that. Who knows what could happen to the wounds you suffered in this locality, at the hands of this reversion? They could disappear entirely."

She shook her head again, raising her right hand to let her fingers trail down the side of Samuel's cheek. He looked into her face and accepted the situation.

"So you lie here and die? Is that the plan?"

"At least one more time," she said. When Samuel began to ask her what she meant, she placed a finger over his mouth. "There isn't enough time for me to give you what you want. But there are some things we need to finish."

Samuel nodded. He slipped a hand into his pocket, his mind already wondering which of the items he carried was the talisman. His ticket out of one dying world and into another.

"I'm on my own cycle. Ours happened to overlap, but they're distinct."

Samuel nodded, watching the strain the conversation had on Mara's strength. "You've been here before," he said.

"I have," she said, her eyes scanning the cavern.

"And the others?" Samuel asked. He looked over his shoulder. "Him? Kole?"

"Sometimes. Not always," she said.

Samuel nodded again, waiting.

The darkness from the reversion crept closer to where they sat in the recess of the main cavern. The shapeless and soundless monster oozed through the entrance, taking gulps of stone and stalagmites. They watched it spread across the floor like twilight seen from space. The air inside the cave became still, suffocating. The cloud dissipated the water and stole the ambient light from within.

"When I was a little girl, I loved sitting on my dad's lap. We'd watch television or sometimes read a book. It didn't matter. What I remember is that feeling of being safe, secure, loved. I would curl up on his chest and the rest of the world would melt away. It wasn't long before pre-adolescence ended that feeling forever. But I lived to recapture it, and at times, I did. It might be a fleeting look of a lover or the comfort of a blanket on a frigid winter's night, but I collected those."

Samuel waited, feeling as though none of the words Mara used could be wasted.

"Whether you're the giver or the recipient of those moments, you must find them too, Samuel. I need you to live wholeheartedly. I want you to promise me that no matter what happens, you'll seek those out, relish them and give others the opportunity to do so as well. You are worthy of your existence. What you bring to the world matters. And that light cannot be snuffed by a cave, or a cloud, or a reversion."

Samuel laughed with Mara. "Don't forget the undead hordes."

It was her turn to smile.

"You and I have something unfinished," Mara said. "I need you to know it's not pleasant for either of us, but it must happen before the reversion in this place ends."

"Anything," he said. "I'll do anything for you after all of the pain I've caused."

She shook her head. "You were not the cause of my pain. You helped define my path, that's all."

"Euphemisms," he said.

"Truth," she said.

Samuel shivered. The spreading gloom crawled up the walls like the animated shadows of an old horror film. He saw tendrils of black spreading across the face of the limestone while more of the physical space fell into the spreading void.

"Tell me what must be done."

"First, help me sit."

Samuel maneuvered behind Mara. He slid his hands underneath her arms and pulled her up until she was able to rest her back against the cave wall. Samuel heard her whimper as the movement agitated her wounds. He waited while she drew deep breaths.

"Do you remember our time in the coffee shop? In the dream?"

Samuel grinned. He pictured her dolled up in maroon-red lipstick and hip-hugging, black denim stretched across all of the right places.

"Yes."

"Good. I wish I could say we're going back there, but we're not. But we have to do the same thing to go somewhere else, a place you'll find painful."

Samuel looked at the black fingers silently scratching their way down the wall.

"It will wait until we're finished," she said, following his gaze.

"What should I do?" he asked.

"Nothing. Let me lead. Once we're there, you'll know what to do."

"Where are we going?"

"I can't answer all of your questions, Samuel. You'll need to trust me. Can you trust me?"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "But I'm coming back alone, aren't I?"

Mara smiled. "Take my hand and don't let go."

Samuel maneuvered his hand into hers. He felt her cold, clammy skin, and he shuddered, imagining what it would feel like in the near future. Mara's skin looked translucent, as if her very essence was fading with the approach of the reversion. Her hair looked greasy and thin, and her eyes were sunk deep into their sockets.

"I'm going to close my eyes and when I do, you should, too. We'll be somewhere different, and yet we'll still be here. I can't explain."

He squeezed her hand.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Mara," he said, "I hope the crossing of our paths helps you. I hope you get peace."

"We all deserve peace," she said.

Mara closed her eyes and Samuel followed her lead. He felt the ground sway, and the electrical thrumming returned to his feet and shot through his legs to his torso. Samuel heard a brush of air move across his skin. The breeze felt different than the air in the cavern. Mara's hand pulsed in his, a quick jolt to let him know she was still there. Samuel arrived in his not-so-distant past.

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*"C'mon, Sammy. 'Tis the season."*

*He looked into his friend's face, red and swollen from Christmas cheer in the form of whiskey bottles and wine carafes.*

*"I can't, man. I have to get home. Kim's going to be worried sick."*

*John held up one finger while the other hand came close to letting the aged whiskey jump the lip on his glass and land on the expensive Berber carpet in the*

boss's living room. The chilly Detroit December made it even more difficult to leave the party. Samuel looked around the room and chuckled. A few of his coworkers were making obscene gestures with ornaments they grabbed from the tree while the shy ladies of the office sat on a couch, sipping mint schnapps stirred with candy canes. The aroma of ginger and chocolate floated by on the notes of John Lennon's famous Christmas melody. Samuel had lost sight of the boss, who was upstairs going over the sales figure of his administrative assistant.

"Check it," Johnny said. He held a black, plastic object in one hand.

"One of the new smartphones. No more shitty signals for me. Got the full voice and data plan."

"That's sweet. How's coverage?" Samuel asked, slipping into the tech talk that came so naturally to him.

"Everywhere. Try it out. Call Kim and let her know you're fine."

"I gotta go."

Johnny rolled his eyes. "Dude, just call her and get yourself another whiskey sour."

Johnny handed Samuel the phone and began picking his way through the people hovering near the natural-gas fireplace. Samuel made more small talk with the group before pushing toward the den, where the hired bartender stood with a gaping yawn. He dialed his number, and the digits on the LCD display made Samuel squint at the device.

One ring.

Two rings.

Three rings.

"Hello?"

The voice came through the pinhole on the earpiece.

"Hey, hon."

"Sam. What time is it?"

He looked down at his watch with the company logo crested in the middle of the face.

"Early evening, I think." As soon as he said it, Samuel cringed, knowing he should have been more precise to prove his sobriety.

"Everything okay?" Kim asked.

"Yeah, fine. Johnny gave me his new smartphone to call you. It's one of those—"

"Sam," Kim said, cutting off his excitement about the newest gadget he would have to own. "You're leaving now, I assume."

"Sorry. Listen, I'm going to hang here with the guys, telling office jokes and making fun of each other's nine irons. Gonna be a bit later." The pause forced Samuel to look at the phone's touch-screen display to make sure it had not dropped the call.

"Kim?"

"Get a cab," she said.

"Honey, I'm fine. I've already started on the black coffee," Samuel said, looking at the whiskey in his opposite hand.

"Samuel," she said with a tone that made his heart ache.

"Really, I'm fine. Keep the back porch light on."

He heard the rustling of the comforter on the other end. Samuel could see her dark hair spread across the black, flannel sheets they put on the bed for winter. He could smell the conditioner in her hair, which would have been blown dry and brushed. Samuel could almost feel the smoothness of her skin from a leg shave in the tub and

moisturizing bath salts. He felt his mouth go dry, seeing his wife's naked body buried beneath the mounds of bedding like a gift, waiting for his arrival.

"Please be careful."

Samuel took a deep breath and nodded until he remembered Kim was not in the room.

"I will. And Kim?"

"Yes?"

He looked around the room at several people within earshot and reconsidered what he was about to say.

"Nothing. Love you. See you later tonight."

"Okay, Sam."

A click followed, and Samuel handed the sleek phone back to his friend.

"We all good?" Johnny asked.

"All good," Samuel said.

They sat at the table in the dining room, where the boss reappeared. His administrative assistant sat on the couch with the other ladies of the office, her hair wispy and her lipstick in need of some touch up.

"Cards, anyone?"

"It's a Christmas party, boss. We can't play poker," Johnny said.

"Holiday party," his boss said. "The wife and kids are gone for the weekend. This is anything I want it to be."

Samuel looked over his shoulder at the ladies gathered on the couch, and then at the men around the table.

"Who's dealing?" Samuel asked.

The poker game played out as most do. A forgetful carousel of laughter, dick jokes and evaluations of female anatomy. The ladies on the couch left to return home to their balding husbands, who would lay a paunch on their stomachs for the two minutes it would take to finish the job. A few observers stood behind the table, pretending to be amused by the entertainment only gamblers can enjoy.

Samuel looked at his stack of chips and shook his head. He had cashed in twice, and there were no bills left in his wallet. Johnny saw him look and flashed Andrew Jackson at him from under the table. Samuel shook his head, even though he found the offer to borrow money for more chips tempting.

"I've only got one or two more hands in me, fellas."

"Keep your desk next to Fagboy Davidson and you'll have more than one or two hands in you, if you know what I'm saying."

Samuel laughed at the vulgar homophobia. He knew it was offensive, but it was also funny. Davidson was still in the closet, although some might say he had one foot sticking out, and it wore a red pump.

"It's already dark, and Kim's going to want me to fix the leaky faucet before I go to bed tonight."

"You fucking family men," Johnny said. "You're always getting told what to do by the ball and chain."

The table roared with laughter, and Samuel waved them off, feeling the Catholic guilt his parents used to raise him.

"One more for me, then I'm done," he said.

"That's what she said," came from another seat at the table, which pitched the group into more laughter.



*"Then you'll need this to help it down."*

*Johnny poured the whiskey from the bottle directly into Samuel's glass. He slammed it down on the table and slapped Samuel on the back.*

*"To Sammy and his family. May he find an easy way to get his wife to consent to a three-way and bring some fun into his boring, suburban life."*

*Samuel smiled and raised his glass while the other poker players clinked theirs, throwing their chins skyward to help ease the liquid down their throats.*

*The hand finished with Samuel losing again. He over-bet the last round in hopes of losing and not cashing out his chips. The self-sabotage worked in his favor, allowing him to rise from the table with an empty whiskey glass as well as an empty wallet.*

*"Fellas," he said with an exaggerated bow. "Unfortunately, I will see all of you assholes at the office on Monday."*

*Another round of laughter filled the room.*

*"Boss," he said, raising a hand in the air, "you do have the best office parties. I'll give you that."*

*With a few more salutations and even more good-natured insults, Samuel searched through the coatrack until he found his black leather. He pushed a curtain aside and looked out at the new round of snow covering his car, making it look like a lump in a bowl of poorly mashed potatoes. Samuel fished through his pockets until he felt his car keys and fisted them in one hand. With a final glance, he looked back at the table to wave, but the poker game had already moved on after his departure. Samuel opened the door and stepped into the chilly, swirling snow. He pulled the collar of his coat tight around his neck and trudged to the driver's side door.*

*Samuel's fingers lumbered around the keyhole, becoming numb in the process. He cursed at the cold air gnawing at him and then swore at the battery in his keys, which were no longer able to open the locks with the magic of infrared rays. He used the tip of the key to scrape the ice crystals from the lock and managed to push it inside. The tumbler surrendered with a click. Samuel shoved his frozen fingers underneath the handle and lifted, dispensing the foggy haze from the dome light into the frigid air. He sighed, blowing plumes of mist before pouring himself into the driver's seat. Samuel shut the door and leaned back on the headrest. The world ramped up on a conveyor belt that started turning everything in a clockwise motion. He opened his eyes and focused on the steering wheel until the car stopped spinning.*

*"The cold air," he said.*

*Samuel placed the key in the ignition, and the car turned over, coughing and wheezing with mechanical influenza. The radio came alive, and he thrust a finger at the presets. Some nameless vanilla hard-rock song came on, which made Samuel's churning stomach even worse. He punched the power button with his right hand while hitting the power window button with his left. The subzero air poured into the car. Samuel felt it burn his lungs before putting the window back up.*

*He gunned the gas pedal several times and released the parking brake. Samuel thought of Kim, but their conversation was an ink blot, dark and formless. He decided she would want him home on a night like this, where he could spoon with her, both of them staying warm. That thought brought a smile to his face.*

*I can do this. Been drinking coffee all night long.*

*"You fucking dog," he said to the empty car. "You have, but you've been dropping whiskey with it."*

*Samuel laughed at his own dishonesty before putting the car into drive. He had already pulled from the curb before he realized he hadn't cleared the snow. The hard, white precipitation covered his windows and protected him from the reality on the other side. Samuel put the windshield wipers into motion. The motor hummed and then rattled, but the wipers remained buried in the snow piled at the base of the windshield.*

*"Dammit."*

*He reached under the seat for his trusty ice scraper and came up with the broken bottom half of it. Samuel tossed it into the back seat and opened the door. The wind tore at his face and whipped his hair into maniacal formations. Samuel pulled his coat sleeve over his hand and used his arm to clear as much of the snow from the windshield as possible. With a round porthole cleared, he stepped back into the car and set the defrost fan to the high setting.*

*Samuel's bladder decided he did not have time to wait for the defroster to clear the window. Departure, and urination, was imminent. He bent low and craned his neck to look through the hole he had scraped. It wasn't much, but Samuel thought he could navigate the car for the ten-minute drive to his house. He would stay under the limit, and he would stay alive.*

*Samuel navigated by alternately sticking his head outside the driver's side window and then looking through the porthole, which allowed him to stay on the road. He successfully avoided parked cars, sidewalks, and garbage cans awaiting pickup.*

*The first car passed with its horn blaring and then fading into the distance like a locomotive in an old western film. He thought he may have heard the driver yelling, but he couldn't be sure. Samuel pulled the vehicle hard to the right, assuming he had drifted into the oncoming lane.*

*"Couple more turns and I'm home," he said to no one.*

*He followed the plows and salt trucks through Detroit's wealthier suburbs as they made their rounds, the last ones before the shift change and a watery cup of warm coffee back at the garage. Samuel concentrated on the blinking lights while the salt pummeled the front end of his car like a localized hailstorm. When the truck turned right toward city hall and the truck garage behind it, Samuel remained on the road. He looked into his rearview mirror and saw black, the narrow secondary streets not equipped with the streetlights like the main thoroughfares. The cold and the darkness closed in, and Samuel felt the need to leave his window all the way down. The bitter, winter air seeped in like a shot of insulin to a diabetic in shock. He sat up straight and blinked. Samuel looked at the street sign and then recalibrated his bearings, figuring he was only three or four miles from his house. In one more mile, he would take a right onto Route 24 for the one-mile stretch that would dump him at the foot of the development. The snow relented, but the chill did not.*

*As Samuel turned onto the local highway, he saw headlights approaching, the first since he left the party. He glanced down at the gauges and felt for the seatbelt strap, hoping to avoid getting pulled over and then having a seatbelt fine on top of it.*

*In an instant, the headlights doubled from two to four. He saw the first set snap out into his lane and then wink as the car slid sideways, fishtailing on the slick roadway. The driver regained control and pulled the vehicle back into his own lane. But it sent the second set of headlights into a spin of its own and into a collision course with his car. Samuel became so enamored with the scene, he didn't notice he let his vehicle drift.*

*Samuel's vehicle struck the oncoming car, creating an impact that crumpled the other car's hood, sending it into an upside-down V, like a cheap accordion. He felt the brunt of the impact, which threw him toward the passenger side and then the seatbelt snapped him back. He felt his car spin and strike three more times, unsure what he was hitting. The sound of crunching metal made him wince. All he wanted was for the car to stop moving, even if it meant slamming straight into a tractor-trailer. Samuel waited and waited, the seconds feeling like lifetimes. When it finally stopped, he was facing the opposite direction on the highway, his passenger side door stuck to the guardrail.*

*The silence lasted for a few seconds. His ears rang and the adrenaline spiked his bloodstream. Samuel felt the warm, sticky blood flowing into his left ear, and he winced. He did a mental check and realized he was alive and without serious injury. The euphoria of that revelation lasted until he looked out the other side of the car at the discarded mess of steel balled up next to the opposite guardrail.*

*Samuel climbed from his car and limped over the frozen roadway toward the other vehicle. He thought he remembered two sets of headlights, but either that vehicle fled or the whiskey had created the extra set of lights. He smelled gasoline and burning rubber, while drops of sizzling liquid pooled in the roadside ice. He looked both ways and saw nothing but the dead of winter. Somewhere beyond his vision, a distant siren blared.*

*A groan from inside the mangled metal brought his attention back. Samuel approached, unsure where the front of the vehicle could be. He saw twisted steel, dark plastic and scraps of humanity thrown together inside the death cage. He walked toward the car and stepped over a hockey stick, followed by a book. The closer he came, the more personal belongings he stepped over.*

*The car's dingy door alarm was on but struggling to maintain sound, as if it was covered in thick foam. Samuel saw the steering wheel contorted like a pretzel as he looked inside the gaping wound where the windshield used to be. He saw the small, delicate frame of a young woman, the seatbelt tight against her throat. Jet-black hair covered her face. Samuel shoved his face inside and heard the ragged, desperate sound of her lungs. He looked at her painted fingernails wrapped around the steering wheel. The smell of exhaust mingled with blood made him queasy.*

*"Are you okay?" he asked.*

*As soon as he spoke the words, he felt like a fool. He could not bear to ask the question he really wanted to ask.*

*"I'll get help."*

*He spun and remembered the Italian restaurant fifty yards up the highway. It was probably getting close to closing time, but an old phone booth stuck out near the guardrail like a beacon of hope. Samuel had just spun toward it when he felt the warm, weak grip on his hand. He jumped and let out a muffled cry.*

*The driver's hand held his. He could feel her erratic pulse, see shallow breathing, but he could not move. The grip squeezed his hand as if to say all was forgiven, accidents happen. Samuel felt the encompassing love, and he knelt low to see inside the remains of the car. He used his free hand to reach in and gently push the hair away from Mara's face.*

*\*\*\**

*The memory advanced like a fluttering reel of film until Samuel sat at a glass pane, holding a corded phone to his ear.*

*Kim came into the visitation room and looked at him. She had not been able to apply her morning make-up over red, puffy eyes. Her face resembled the photograph hanging above the dresser, the one of her and Samuel in college. She loved that picture and the wispy memories of youth it represented. They both remembered the night that photograph was taken and always joked that Kim's hold on her car keys was as strong as the one she had on Samuel's heart.*

*"Kim, I thought I was fine."*

*"There's no point. After what we've been through, after what you've been through, I can't . . ." Kim trailed off, fumbling through the conversation.*

*"I'm so sorry. I'm going to make this right," he said.*

*Kim sat, her bottom lip trembling.*

*"The kids?"*

*"My mother's," she said.*

*"Now what?"*

*"Now you figure out how you're going to live with this, Samuel. Now you have to ask God, or whatever demonic force that commands you, for forgiveness and hope he doesn't strike you down."*

*"What should I do about—"*

*"I don't give a fuck, Samuel. You do whatever it is you need to do."*

*He could hear the pain in her voice.*

*"I'll deal with it."*

*Kim laughed. "I'm sure you will."*

\*\*\*

Samuel opened his eyes, returning to the cave where Mara lay at the mercy of the reversion.

"I'm so sorry."

Mara squeezed Samuel's hand just as she had on that cold night. She smiled, and the worry lines in her face loosened.

"I can't believe that all this time you, you knew that . . ." Samuel shook his head, tears clouding his vision. "I'm the reason you're here, stuck in this prison."

"Come closer," Mara whispered. Her eyes closed, and the life drained from her voice.

Samuel moved closer and bent down, taking her hand in both of his.

"I let you see what I thought you needed to see while you were here."

He nodded, setting at least some of his guilt free. "Mara, I . . . I can't believe I did that to you, and—"

She squeezed his hand again and shook her head as much as possible. "Life did that to me, not you."

Samuel started to speak but Mara squeezed his hand, stopping him.

"There isn't much time. Please listen," she said.

Samuel dropped his head and waited for her to continue.

"I didn't see your face at the scene. I passed before you came over to the wreck. But when you arrived in this place, I argued with Kole."

A memory sparked in Samuel's head. He remembered seeing the disagreement at a distance.

"We didn't so much argue about you, although he claimed you were someone from his past. I guess you could have passed through both of our lives, but I don't really

know. I told him you were here for me, for him, for all of us. I explained you had a purpose and a mission to release us from this.”

“But he didn’t agree. Major didn’t agree either, did he?” Samuel asked.

She shook her head.

“They could have been here for other reasons,” she said, a wet cough thundering through her chest. “But I knew why you were here and what that meant for me.”

“What does it mean for me?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I wish I could say, but I can’t. You’ll have to figure that out.”

Samuel looked up. Their bodies appeared to float in pure darkness. The reversion had begun to peck at their feet. Samuel could feel the power trying to dissolve the molecules in his body. The cave and the rest of the dead locality attached to it were gone, swallowed and consumed by the inevitable force of the reversion.

“How? When? Where?”

Mara let the single-word questions hang in the air without attempting to answer any of them.

“If you can figure out why you’re here, the answers to those questions might show themselves to you.”

“Do you know why you’re here?” he asked.

Mara nodded. “Yes.” It was all she said.

Mara’s eyelids fluttered, and Samuel felt her breath hitch in her chest. He wiped her forehead with the back of his hand and felt the cool, clammy touch of death descending upon her, challenging the reversion for the last spark of life left.

“This is my time,” Mara said.

Samuel closed his eyes and felt the oppressive force of nothingness closing in on him.

“How will I know? How will I know how I got here and what to do about it?”

Mara opened her eyes and looked at Samuel for the last time. He saw the forgiveness and sadness inside, the emotional turmoil simmering in the deep recesses. She bit her lip and spoke again, her words barely audible this time.

“I will show you.”

\*\*\*

Samuel saw the inky blackness, like oil-slicked surf, the silent waves pulsing over her body. He felt weightless as the power of the reversion disassembled the atoms left in the locality. He screamed in helpless futility as he watched the darkness creep over Mara. It slid over her foot, and when it retreated it left nothing but empty blackness behind. He watched as the forces nibbled and bit at her essence like fish feeding on a floating corpse.

He knew whatever was happening to her physical body was a different experience than what was happening to her spirit. Samuel smiled, seeing Mara’s angelic face from the coffee shop in his mind’s eye, rather than the pasty, sickly face of her lying in the cold dirt of the cave and waiting for death.

Samuel watched as the last remnants of Mara’s body disappeared beneath the relentless pursuit of the reversion. With her body gone, he became a drifting ship amidst a horrific ocean of darkness and silence. The reversion began the same process on him, albeit at a much slower pace. He reached down to touch his knee and became queasy, uncertain of his bearings and feeling, like an astronaut tumbling through deep space, carried into oblivion without the slightest friction to stop it. He closed his eyes and opened them to try to stabilize his mind, but the attempt failed.

Samuel opened his mouth to scream when a voice entered his head. He knew it was Mara before she even spoke.

*I must show you what you can no longer access from your own memory. If I don't do it now, the reversion will claim you forever.*

Samuel cried, ready to follow her, ready to do anything to escape the fate perched on the threshold of his humanity.

*Your final moments, those inaccessible to you since you arrived here. Those moments will enlighten you, provide answers to questions you have not asked. They will also explain your presence here, and once you have that knowledge, you will know what you must do.*

"What if I don't?" he asked.

*All you can do is trust in what I have to share.*

Samuel felt Mara's essence dissipate. The energy in his body shifted, and he felt his mind snap back into the physical realm. The blackness of the reversion retreated until the fuzzy hole of a dream reality filled the middle, like viewing it through a telescope. The blackness surrounding the edges of his vision reminded Samuel this was something for him to witness, but the reversion still held him in its clutches.

The objects swam through his vision until they began to settle and form within the frame. A burning knowledge began in his stomach, and the pain blossomed outward as the scene materialized. When the objects stopped and the lens on the vision focused, Samuel cried. He remembered the scene, he remembered the cast, and even though the pain tore through his psyche, he also remembered his lines. Samuel was not sure he could manage to sit through the clip until he felt the inner strength of Mara, speaking to him.

*You must. And from your suffering will come your salvation.*

\*\*\*

*Samuel slid the triskele from underneath the thin mattress that smelled of piss and disinfectant. He smiled and held the item in his hand, pleased to have been able to smuggle the talisman into his cell without hiding it within one of his body's orifices.*

*The cinder-block wall stared at him from all angles, disguising up from down and inside from out. The stainless-steel sink sat next to the basin that functioned as a toilet. Both fixtures faced the bars of the open cell and anyone that happened to be walking the corridor of his ward. A black marker sat in the corner of the room, while a simple calendar hung from the wall above it. The air inside the prison hung as if it too was sentenced to a life of pure, dead boredom.*

*"I'm cold," Samuel yelled.*

*He shuffled to the front of the cell and looked out. Samuel saw nobody.*

*"I need a fucking blanket."*

*The sound of scraping metal preceded the methodical tapping of boots on the polished floor.*

*"Bout time."*

*Samuel stepped back and waited as the guard approached with a thin blanket folded down to the size of a postcard. He looked at Samuel and sniffed, turning his nose up at the stench.*

*"Flush the damn toilet, you animal."*

*The guard tossed the blanket through the bars. It landed at Samuel's feet. He bent down and picked up the linen. Samuel listened as the boots clicked their way back to the front desk, sealed off with the massive, steel door shrieking into place.*

*Samuel unfolded the sheet masquerading as a blanket and did the mental calculations in his head. He looked up at the heating duct burrowing through the cinder-block walls and hoped the sheet was long enough. He took the thin, felt slippers from his feet and knotted the end of the sheet around both until the ball of cloth outweighed the rest of the fabric. He looked up at the three-inch gap between the ductwork and the ceiling, and then visually measured the ball in his hand.*

*He walked toward the sink and splashed his face with water. The pungent stench of chlorine invaded his mouth, and Samuel remembered the inmates telling him to never drink the water from the sink inside the cell. Samuel laughed at that advice and its absurdity in his current situation. He looked at the calendar and the mangled photo tucked under the corner. It would not matter for Samuel. He would never see his family again.*

*He punched the wall and felt the skin on his knuckles pull back until the warm blood flowed over them. Samuel punched the cinder block again until the bones in his hand succumbed to the power of the cement.*

*The lights in the corridor buzzed. Samuel looked up to see the overhead fluorescent bulbs wink and extinguish as the electricity retreated from the wires. Several wire-encased sconces flickered to life where they were mounted between cells. The curfew buzzer sounded, followed by a sighing symphony of incarcerated souls. Samuel did not feel tired, but then again, he lost track of day and night long ago. He slept when the lights went out and woke when they came back to life.*

*Samuel waited for his eyes to adjust, staring at the battered photograph. He kissed two fingers on his right hand and touched them to Kim's face. Samuel would give anything to be standing in that frame, his hand on her back as they smiled at the optimistic future awaiting them. He sat on the edge of the bunk and put his face in his hands.*

*There could be an appeal.*

*He swore at himself as soon as the thought appeared. His attorney had taken him through those permutations, and an appeal was as likely as the guard opening the door and setting him free.*

*Then stop stalling and get to it, you fucking coward.*

*Samuel stood and nodded his head, shaking the last bit of doubt from it. He took the end of the sheet containing the slippers and balled it in his right hand. Samuel stepped back and lobbed the sheet toward the duct. The first two tries bounced off the wall and fell back to him. The third toss landed on top before sliding across it and out the other side. Samuel stopped, hoping the guards would not have heard it strike the duct.*

*It'll never hold you.*

*He cursed the voice trying to keep him from ending the pain once and for all.*

*"Got steel straps tied into the block to reinforce the duct. It'll hold."*

*He winced at the sound of his voice. It sounded foreign to his ears.*

*Samuel pulled the loose end until the knot held between the top of the heating duct and the wall. He clutched the sheet with both hands and pulled his feet off the floor. Samuel dangled a few inches in the air, neither the sheet nor the duct giving any indication they would not be able to finish the job.*

*He climbed on the bunk and stood on the edge of it. Samuel took the loose end and tied it around his neck several times, taking all of the slack from the fabric. He reached up and tied a knot behind his head. Sweat poured from his skin, causing a*

*shiver in the cold chill of the cell. Samuel's mouth went dry, and his palms became moist. He slid the triskele out of the waistband of his underwear and held it in his right hand. Samuel did not pray. He did not ask forgiveness from the all-powerful forces of the universe. If the talisman did not serve him as he crossed over, nothing would.*

*His bare toes extended over the edge of the bunk that sat two feet from the floor. Samuel looked up again to verify the knot held at the top before reaching around to check his noose held firm. He took shallow, rapid breaths, trying to exhale the last remnants of hesitation.*

*When Samuel stepped off the bed, the last things he smelled was the distant aroma of moldy bark.*

\*\*\*

Samuel pushed the twisted sheet from his shoulder and let the makeshift noose coil on the ground like a dead snake. He looked up at the decaying branch, shook his head, his eyes darting about the empty forest as his heart raced in his chest.

He drew a breath, exhaling slowly and wincing at the pain in his throat as his lungs tried to pull in more oxygen. He smiled from the joy of being alive until the memory of his prison cell wiped it from his face. Like a leaf at the mercy of the wind, the image of the bars floated from Samuel's reach. Worry rushed back in to fill his mind as he struggled to find a connection, a reason for being here.

He noticed the sun dropped closer to the horizon as if touching the tops of the trees to ignite them. Darkness crept closer, surrounding the far edges of his vision. He closed his eyes and felt forgiveness in his heart. He could not recall her name or remember why she had granted him absolution.

**To be continued...**

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#### ***Reversion: The Inevitable Horror (The Portal Arcane Series - Book I)***

With a noose around his neck, Samuel arrives in a forest littered with caution tape and artifacts of the deceased. He struggles to regain his memory while fending off a pack of wolves and the mysterious visitors who seem to know more about this dying world than he does. Major, Kole and Mara, new companions also trapped in this strange place, realize they must outrun the ominous cloud eating away at their world before it collapses upon itself. Samuel must find a way to escape the reversion.

#### ***The Law of Three: A New Wasteland (The Portal Arcane Series - Book II)***

The reversion plucks Samuel from a dying world and drops him into another, a decaying desert wasteland of darkness and peril. As his memories return, he finds himself in another cycle of destruction. With newcomers Jack and Lindsay, Samuel leads the group towards redemption in the mountain stronghold of a mysterious man known as Deva. Finally, as the locality collapses behind him, Samuel realizes his only escape from the reversion will be putting his faith in The Law of Three.

#### ***Corrosion: Terminal Horizon (The Portal Arcane Series - Book III)***

Samuel and Lindsay arrive on the shores of another reversion and quickly realize their journey is not over. They pass through a portal, slipping into a rotting and decayed city inhabited by an army of the undead and their maleficent leader, his brother Kole. While trying desperately to beat the cloud to the east, Samuel must also face his

brother and the inevitable confrontation at the end of the world. Only one will survive the Corrosion.

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## About the Author



### Healed by the written word

Want a story that's rooted in a fundamental aspect of being human?

I believe reading dark fiction can be healing. My overriding mission is to connect with you through my art, and I hope to inspire you to do the same. I'm a word architect and driven visionary. I'm obsessed with heavy metal, horror films and technology. And I admire strong people who are not afraid to speak their mind.

I grew up in an Irish Catholic, working class family and was the first to go to college. I didn't have expensive toys, so I used my own imagination for entertainment. And then I abused alcohol for entertainment. I spent the first thirty years of my life convincing myself I wasn't an addict and the last ten worrying about all the potential threats the substances hid from me.

Anxiety and depression are always hiding in the corner, waiting to jump me when I start to feel happiness.

I had to break through family programming and accept the role of the black sheep. In my 30s I started writing horror and formed a heavy metal band while my family rolled their eyes, sighed and waited for the "phase" to end.

I spent years paralyzing myself with self-loathing and criticism, keeping my creativity smothered and hidden from the rest of the world. I worked a job I hated because that's what Irish Catholic fathers do. They don't express themselves, they pay the damn mortgage. I may have left my guilt and faith behind long ago, but the scars remain.

My creativity is my release, my therapy and my place to work through it all. I haven't had a drink in a long time, but the anxiety and depression are always lurking. Writing novels and songs keeps it at bay. I scream over anxiety with my microphone and I turn my guitar up loud enough to drown out the whispers of self-doubt.

I hope to leave a legacy of art that will continue to entertain and enrich lives long after I'm gone. I want others to see that you don't have to conform to the mainstream to be fulfilled.

Don't be afraid of the dark. Embrace it.

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